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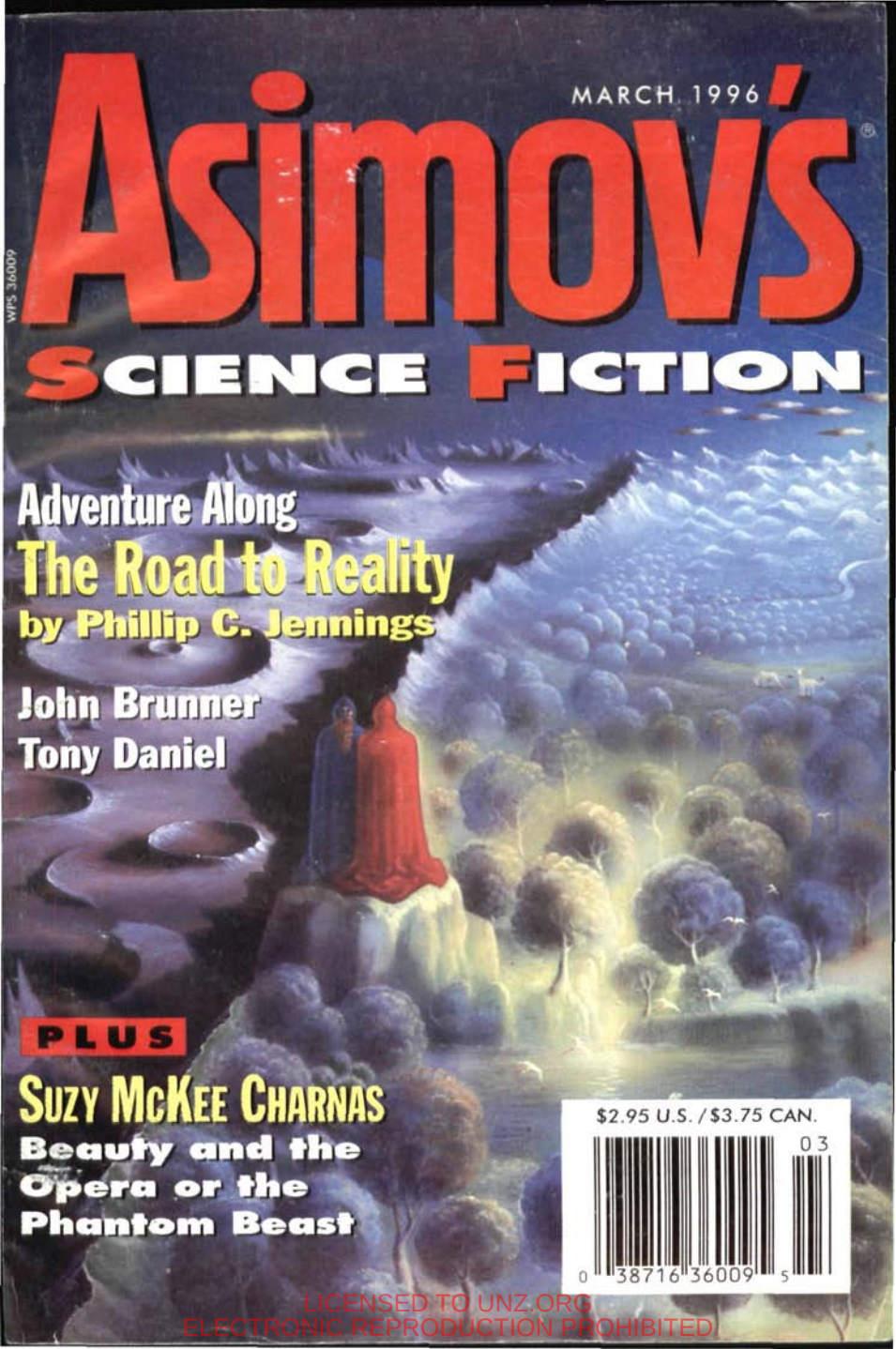

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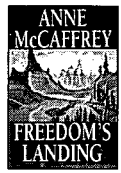

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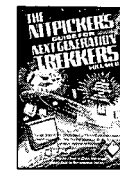

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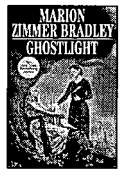

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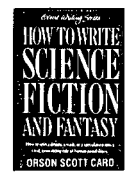

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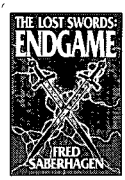

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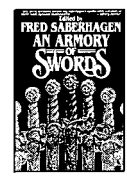

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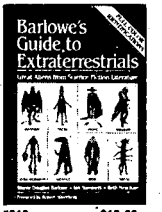

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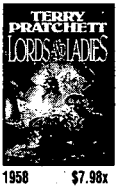

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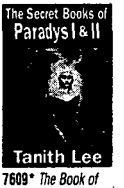

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

ROGER AND JOHN

The deaths last summer of Roger Zelazny and John Brunner knocked two giant holes in the science fiction firmament. They also caused me considerable personal sorrow. And, in an incidental way, the two deaths happened to provide a vivid illustration of the meaning of the word "tragedy" in its classical literary sense. For—as I'll explain in a moment—one death seems to me to have been truly tragic, and the other not tragic at all, but rather simply a damned shame.

Both men had had long and significant careers as writers; both met relatively early deaths. Zelazny, who died of cancer on June 14, 1995, was fifty-eight years old. His first professionally published science fiction story appeared in 1962. Brunner, who succumbed to a massive stroke at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, Scotland, on August 25, 1995—the first time, by the way, that a writer has died at a Worldcon—was sixty. His earliest published work of science fiction, apparently, was the pseudonymous novel *Galactic Storm* by "Gill Hunt," which was issued in 1952, when he was only eighteen.

Of course the loss of these two great writers so much before their time was a lamentable thing for those who love science fiction and fantasy, who revered their work, and who hoped yet to see further masterpieces from them; and of course I am among that group. But what struck me so particularly hard about these two events, only about ten weeks apart, was something much more private. The fact that both men were within a year or so of me in age, Roger a bit younger, John a few months older, naturally provided me with intimations of my own mortality. But—beyond that—I took their passing virtually as I would deaths in my own family. It is not simply the authors of *Lord of Light* and *Stand on Zanzibar* and *This Immortal* and *The Whole Man,* but *Roger* and *John* that I mourn.

I have never had much of a family life. I had neither brothers nor sisters, and by choice I have had no children. My few actual relatives live on the other side of the continent from me and I have little contact with them. And so I have tended to turn the world of professional science fiction writers and editors into a surrogate family for me. I have had, along the way, surrogate fathers like Lester del Rey, and surrogate uncles like Fred Pohl and Isaac Asimov and Harry Harrison, and surrogate brothers like Harlan Ellison and Joe Haldeman

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and Barry Malzberg and my agent, Ralph Vicinanza; and a few surrogate sisters also. I have a whole host of surrogate cousins and nieces and nephews as well. And so I regard my colleagues not as competitors or rivals whose successes threaten me, but rather as kinsmen for whom I have the warmest of affection. I cheer them when they win awards; I offer comfort when things go badly for them. When one of them seems to have done something annoying or irritating or foolish, as members of your family will invariably do, my reaction is always tempered by love. And when one of them dies—especially when the death comes well before it should—it is a harsh and sometimes devastating blow.

Roger and John were my friends for decades. I first met John at the World Science Fiction Convention in London in 1957, and Roger at the Cleveland convention nine years later. They were very different men and my friendships with them were different from each other in many ways, but in their different ways those friendships were strong and loving ones, and to have them ripped away from me so suddenly and so soon is a difficult thing to face.

I said above that their deaths, for me, illustrate the difference between a tragedy and a damned shame. Let me try to explain.

"Tragedy," in modern times, has become an overworked and even debased word. We read about the tragic outcome of a schoolyard brawl or some barroom quarrel, or about a tragic traffic accident, or

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the tragic failure of some team to win the championship that it seeks. We hear about the tragedy of Bosnia, the tragedy of the environment, the tragedy of AIDS, this tragedy and that one. These are all serious matters, and for the people directly involved they surely seem tragic indeed. But none of them is a classical tragedy in the literary sense, a tragedy in the way that the ancient Greek playwrights understood the meaning of the term.

To the Greeks, a tragedy was a very specific thing: the story of a man (or sometimes a woman) of great capability and attainment and ambition, who attempts great things and ultimately fails in his attempt, overreaching himself and losing all because of some inherent and fundamental flaw in his character. The very thing that drives him to his greatness will eventually and unavoidably bring him down. His downfall and defeat are instructive; and the onlookers, the audience at the drama, experience a catharsis, and go from the theater purged of the feelings of pity and fear by having vicariously lived through the tragedy of the hapless tragic protagonist.

One of the best known of tragic figures is Sophocles' Oedipus—a man of kingly bearing and nobility of soul, whose tragic flaw is his hot temper. En route to the city of Thebes, Oedipus becomes embroiled in a quarrel with a stranger at a crossroads, and kills him, unaware that the other man is in fact the father from whom he has long been separated, Laius, the king of Thebes. He continues on into the city, and in short order not only replaces Laius as king but marries Laius' widow, Queen Jocasta—again, unaware that she is his own mother.

The gods, appalled by the misdeeds of Oedipus, however unknowing they had been, send a plague down on Thebes. Angrily Oedipus vows to find out who is the villain responsible for the city's difficulties, and perseveres in this effort until he learns, to his own horror, that the man he must punish is himself. Whereupon he blinds himself and resigns his kingship, and goes forth as an outcast into the world, wandering in poverty until he attains the forgiveness of the gods and redemption many years later.

Or consider Agamemnon, the great leader of the Greek army that went off to make war against Troy. He is so proud, so utterly determined to achieve victory in the war, that he unhesitatingly sacrifices his own daughter Iphigenia when a soothsayer tells him that the girl must be slain in order for the Greeks to have success against the Trojans. In the modern world it is Iphigenia who might seem to be the tragic figure, but to the Greeks she was merely incidental to the story; it is mighty Agamemnon around whom the tragedy centers, for he will be brought down in the hour of his triumph years later upon his return to Greece, when his vengeful wife Clytemnestra murders him for having given their daughter up for sacrifice.

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And then there is the demigod Prometheus, who looks down upon the hapless primitive race that is mankind, and takes pity upon them and, in contravention of the direct commandment of Zeus, teaches them the use of fire and the other arts of life. Prometheus, stubborn and rigid, implacably driven by the demands of his own conscience, sees himself as having no choice but to defy Zeus; but Zeus, the new and still insecure king of the gods, is equally implacable in his punishment of Prometheus' defiance, and chains him to a rock for all eternity, setting an eagle to pluck forever at his liver.

Shakespeare understood the nature of tragedy, too. He gave us the lordly Macbeth, whose flaw was that he is unable to say no to his ferocious wife, and the valiant Othello, who is vulnerable only to whispered innuendos of his wife's infidelity, and the regal Lear, who foolishly thinks that his eldest daughters love him, and many another such tragic figure.

And what do Lear and Othello and Macbeth, Prometheus and Agamemnon and Oedipus, have to do with Roger and John?

This: that the life and death of one of these men fulfills the requirements of classical tragedy, and one does not. One lived a happy life, a man successful virtually from the start in all that he attempted and greatly beloved by all who knew him, and at a particularly joyous time of his life was cruelly picked off in a random way by a malevolent twitch of a few cells within his own body. His death was a sad thing, a great loss, a cause for lamentation—a damned shame. But the other man, after setting equally high goals for himself and attaining equally great things, was cast down from those heights midway through his days by circumstances partly of his own making, and found himself forced into a lonely, embittered existence that ultimately damaged his health and shortened his life. His fall from grace was truly tragic.

Roger was the happy man who led the happy life. He wanted from boyhood to be a writer; his poetry and fiction appeared in his school literary magazines, and often won prizes. By the time he was twenty-five he had begun what was to be a dazzling career in science fiction, and within a year had published the astonishing novella "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," which brought him his first Hugo nomination, widespread acclaim, and a place in the definitive anthology *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame.* When the Nebula awards began in 1965, Roger, still only twenty-eight, won two the very first year, for the novella "He Who Shapes" and the novelette "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth." A year later he had his first Hugo, for the novel . . . *And Call Me Conrad,* and a long string of further Hugos and Nebulas would follow, most recently the Hugo in 1986 for "24 Views of Mount Fuji" and in 1987 for "Permafrost." His novel *Damnation Alley* became a movie; his

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lengthy "Amber" fantasy series has had enormous popularity with readers since its inception in 1970.

His personal life was just as serene a succession of triumphs. After a brief early marriage about which he rarely spoke, he married Judy Callahan in 1966. The marriage, which produced three wonderful children, always struck me as enviably stable and happy; and when, to my great surprise, Roger and Judy separated a few years ago, he settled into a new and obviously satisfying relationship with Jane Lindskold, whom he was planning to marry at the time of his death. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he had settled in 1975 in a lovely house overlooking the city, he had a close and supportive circle of friends, and wider circles of friendship beyond, for he was a gentle and charming man whom it was impossible to dislike. And then, suddenly, at the apogee of this admirable life, came the cancer that killed him within a year.

John, too, had had a fast start to his career. Prolific, energetic, he filled the science fiction magazines of the late fifties and early sixties with superb stories by the dozens, and made an early mark in the novel with such titles as *Echo in the Skull* and *The Hundredth Millennium*. His early work was always competent and professional, and sometimes a good deal more than that; but when he was about thirty he found his mature voice, and gave us a string of significant books like *Squares of the City* and *The Whole Man*, and then in 1969 the huge and masterly *Stand on Zanzibar*, which brought him his first and only Hugo award. He seemed to build on that triumph in the years immediately following, with such important and well-received books as *The Jagged Orbit* and *The Sheep Look Up* and *The Shockwave Rider*, in which he invented the concept of computer viruses at a time—1975—when the computer concept itself was still largely unfamiliar to most people. He was still only in his mid-thirties; and it appeared that he was staking a claim for himself in the science fiction world as a natural successor to the aging titans, Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke.

It was not to be. Something went wrong in John's life.

He was a more than usually complicated man—a prickly perfectionist, sometimes sharp-tongued, always certain of the correctness of the positions he took, generally (though not always) with good reason. As the critic Peter Nicholls aptly put it at the convention where John died, "John Brunner was a clever, generous, difficult man and not all that easy to love. The interesting thing is that so many of us did."

His manner—suave, aristocratic, erudite—bothered some people. His wit and brilliance often proved alienating. He had many friends, but in time he began to make enemies, too, and some of them were powerful ones. There were fellow writers who disliked him and did him disservices. He fell easily into

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friction with editors who displeased him or agents who failed to fulfill his high expectations.

Perhaps the critical moment of transition for John from successful writer to tragic figure—the true tragic overreaching that ultimately shattered him—was his decision, about 1975, to write a massive historical novel set in nineteenth-century America, a book called *The Great Steamboat Race*. It was a book of a type remote from anything he had done before and very much unlike anything that John's readers—the fans of *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up*—were expecting. He worked on it for five terrible years, from 1976 to 1981, during which time the editor who had purchased the book and the agent who had arranged its sale both died. The effort cost John a prodigious amount of energy and undoubtedly weakened his health; and, because he did no other work during the time he was writing it, it became an enormous drain on his finances. Then the massive thing finally appeared, in February of 1983, and it failed utterly. It sank from sight and left no trace. He was never the same again. When he came to the U.S. in the summer of that year, as guest of honor at the Baltimore Worldcon, he seemed weary and shaken, and told me that most of his books were out of print and no publisher seemed interested in taking on his future work.

Another great blow fell in 1986, when his wife Marjorie died. She was considerably older than John, and had been failing for some time; but her death, nevertheless, had a shattering impact on him. I saw him on two occasions in Europe in the autumn of 1987; he was then only fifty-three years old, but he looked like an old man.

From then on all paths led downward for John. Marjorie's death caused problems for him that took him away from his writing for months at a time. His worsening health—he had a genetic predisposition toward hypertension and strokes—called for medications that interfered with his concentration, a terrible circular trap, further damaging a tottering career. He married again a few years ago, but the marriage was a troubled one. He began to seem like a lost soul, haunted, despondent. In an astonishingly sad convention speech a couple of years ago, he spoke openly of the collapse of his career and expressed the hope that some publisher might offer him proofreading work to do as a way of paying his bills. As I said in a eulogy I delivered for him at the convention where he died, his sudden death may have been a welcome release from an ever more difficult life. And yet—it was the final tragic twist—I understand that not long before he died John had resolved to embark on a major new novel, one that he hoped would restore his position in our field and replenish his depleted savings. In order to write it with a clear head, though, he had to stop taking the medicine that controlled his high blood pressure—a decision that surely must

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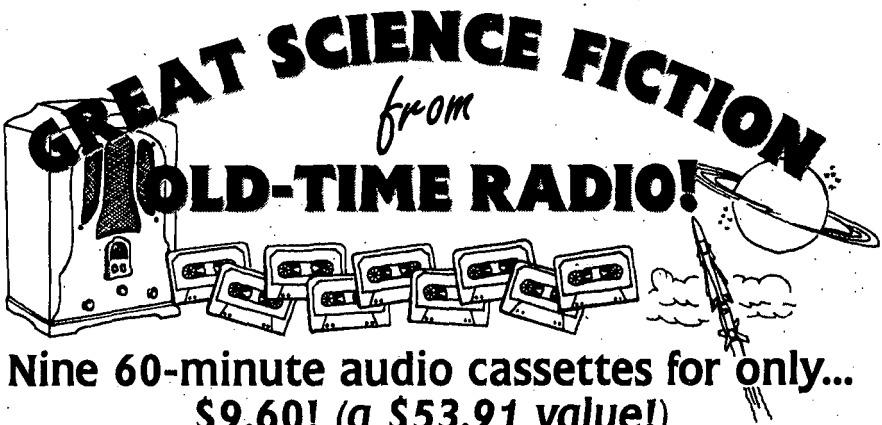

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have been a contributing factor to his fatal stroke.

So we lost two of our finest writers almost simultaneously last summer, and I lost two old friends, and we were provided with a sorry literary lesson in the meaning of tragedy to boot. John Brunner's long sad decline from his early greatness, marked as it was by bad choices and bad luck and bad health and culminating finally in the thunderbolt from the jeering gods that brought him down at a science fiction convention, is as close to a true classic tragedy as we can have in this godless age. Whereas Roger Zelazny, happy all the way, was by a bitter irony interrupted prematurely in the serene progression of his sunny life—a melancholy thing, greatly to be regretted; but (as Roger himself, a student of classical drama, would surely agree) nothing that Sophocles or Shakespeare could have used as the substance of a great play. ●

FOR A COLLEAGUE, DEPARTED

In memory of Roger Zelazny

I met you just the once: we sparred,
Briefly and obliquely. Now you're dead:
Three column inches in the *Times*.

No mention of the gorgeous Mars
That made your name. Now you are dead,
And out of print is out of mind.
Surely among a million stars

One shines for you now. You are dead,
But lines you've written will be read.

—Tom Disch
6/17/95

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George R. R. Martin

THE LORD OF LIGHT

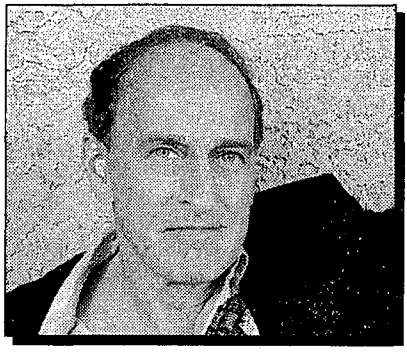

Photo by Beth Gwinn

He was a poet, first, last, always. His words sang.

He was a storyteller without peer. He created worlds as colorful and exotic and memorable as any our genre has ever seen.

But most of all, I will remember his people. Corwin of Amber and his troublesome siblings. Charles Render, the dream master. The Sleeper, Croyd Crenson, who never learned algebra. Fred Cassidy climbing on his rooftops. Conrad. Dilvish the Damned. Francis Sandow. Billy Blackhorse Singer. Jarry Dark. The Jack of Shadows. Hell Tanner. Snuff.

And Sam. Him especially. "His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god."

Lord of Light was the first Zelazny book I ever read. I was in college at the time, a longtime reader who dreamed of writing himself one day. I'd been weaned on Andre Norton, cut my teeth on Heinlein juveniles, survived high school with the help of H.P. Lovecraft, Isaac Asimov, "Doc" Smith, Theodore Sturgeon, and J.R.R. Tolkien. I read Ace doubles and belonged to the Science Fiction Book Club, but I had not yet found the magazines. I'd never heard of this Zelazny guy. But when I read those words for the first time, a chill went through me, and I sensed that SF would never be the same. Nor was it. Like only a few before him, Roger left his mark on the genre.

He left his mark on my life as well. After *Lord of Light,* I read every word of his I could get my hands on. "He Who Shapes," . . . *And Call Me Conrad,* "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," *Isle of the Dead,* "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," *Creatures of Light and Darkness,* and all the rest. I knew I had found one hell of a writer in this fellow with the odd, unforgettable name. I never dreamed that, years later, I would also find in Roger one hell of a friend.

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I met Roger several times in the mid-seventies; at a writer's workshop in Bloomington, Indiana, at cons in Wichita and El Paso, at Nebula banquets. By then, I had made a few sales on my own. I was surprised and thrilled when Roger knew my work. He was at first blush a shy man, always kind, often funny, but quiet. I cannot say I knew him well . . . not until the end of 1979, when I moved to Santa Fe, fresh from a divorce, near broke, and utterly alone.

Roger was the only person I knew in town, and him not that well. We were colleagues and con acquaintances, no more, but from the way he treated me, you would have thought we had been the closest of friends for years. He saw me through the worst months. We shared dinners and breakfasts and endless shoptalk. He drove me to Albuquerque for the monthly First Friday writers' lunch. When a local bookstore asked him to do a signing, he made sure that I was invited as well. He took me with him to parties and wine tastings, even asked me to share Thanksgiving and Christmas with his family. If I had to fly to a con, he drove across town to pick up my mail and water my plant. And when my money was running low at the end of my first year in Santa Fe, he offered me a loan to tide me over until I could finish *Fevre Dream*.

It wasn't just me. He did as much, and more, for others. Roger was as kind and generous as any man I have ever known. He was the best kind of company. Often quiet, but always interesting. Sometimes it seemed he had read every book ever printed. He knew something about everything and everything about some things, but he never used his knowledge to impress or intimidate. In an age when everyone is a specialist, Roger was the last Renaissance Man, fascinated by the world and all that's in it, capable of talking about Doc Savage and Proust with equal expertise and enthusiasm.

Those who saw him only from a distance sometimes came away with the impression that Roger was serious, grave, dignified, never dreaming how funny the man could be. No one who heard the Chicken Effect Speech at Bubonicon will ever forget it. Wild Cards fans still grin at the memory of Croyd and the decomposing alien. During the last year of Roger's life, Jane Lindskold introduced him to roleplaying, and he took to it with the glee of a small boy, mischievous and ever inventive. I will always cherish those people too, although only a few of us were fortunate enough to meet them. His Chinese poet warrior, declaiming thunderingly bad poems as he walked down an endless muddy road. His spaceship chaplain solemnly explaining evolution and ethics to an increasingly confused alien. And Oklahoma Crude, roughneck oilman, chewing tobacco and swapping jokes with space pirates and musketeers alike.

A few months ago, when Howard Waldrop was passing through Santa Fe, I threw a party. Howard

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wound up sitting on the floor, while Roger read a musical comedy he'd just written, about Death and his godson. Roger sang all the parts, sort of chanting them, a little off-key maybe . . . well, okay, maybe more than a little. One by one the other guests interrupted their conversations and drifted over to hear him read and sing, until the whole party gathered around Roger's feet. By the end, there was a smile on every face.

He was fighting Death himself then, though only Jane knew it. And that was very like Roger too, to keep his pains private, to take fear and shape it into art, to transform illness and death into a song, a story, and a roomful of smiles.

"But look around you . . ." he wrote in *Lord of Light*. "Death and Light are everywhere, always, and they begin, end, strive, attend, into and upon the Dream of the Nameless that is the world, burning words within Samsara, perhaps to create a thing of beauty." ●

Joe Haldeman

MEMORIES OF JOHN BRUNNER

Photo supplied by *Locus*

I was honored when, four years ago, John Brunner asked me to edit what, sadly, turned out to be his last book, *The Best of John Brunner*. John had been, with the novels *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up*, one of the handful of writers who'd made science fiction seem like a worthwhile and challenging occupation back in the sixties and early seventies, when my generation was starting.

Having agreed to the pleasant editing job, I went down to the local bookstore to see what else John had on the stands. I was surprised to find nothing. I was shocked to check *Books in Print* and find nothing listed there, either. The last time I had talked to John, in England, I remembered he had been depressed about his American sales "presence." I hadn't realized he was completely absent.

It didn't seem like that long

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since he had been one of the three or four brightest stars in our science fiction firmament, but that's partly an artifact of my own age: when you start out writing, you look around and check out the competition. I saw two pairs of hot young writers—Delany and Zelazny, Silverberg and Brunner. The other three were still rising stars, though. Brunner had scored a one-two punch, and had one solid follow-up in 1975's *The Shockwave Rider*, but his own view of his career was autumnal.

"When I dropped out of school at age seventeen," he told interviewer Charles Platt, "I envisaged a certain range of ambitions: I wanted to make my living as a writer, I wanted to win a Hugo, have a nice home, be happily married, all the usual things. Twenty years went by and I suddenly realized that I had achieved all of the ambitions that I was capable of visualizing when I was seventeen. . . . I'm still casting around for something which will concentrate my faculties. I suspect this happens to many people who reach that age which, in the wild state, would correspond to one becoming a tribal elder."

Indeed, much of what occupied John in the years after that interview were actions and passions more philosophical than writerly. With his wife Marjorie, he devoted more and more energy and time to various social causes, such as nuclear disarmament and racial equality. They created and funded the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, awarded to literary works that further interracial understanding.

Health problems and fatigue cut his literary output almost to nothing in the late seventies and eighties, and Marjorie's death in 1986 was a final disaster. Science fiction did recognize his contributions by feting him as Guest of Honor at the 1983 World Science Fiction Convention, and he was often similarly honored in Western and Eastern Europe—venues where his uncompromisingly liberal politics were more welcome.

In fact, the last time I saw John was in Romania, last year, when we were American and British guests of honor at the annual Eurocon. He was in a state of deep depression, darkly convinced that there was some sort of organized resistance against him in American and British publishing. I had to point out to him that every serious science fiction writer was suffering in the American marketplace, crippled by the evaporation of the backlist and lost in the fast turnover of more than a thousand titles a year.

He was not convinced. One would like to hope that before his death he could have arrived at a more comfortable state, secure in the knowledge that he had made a firm and lasting impression on the literature he loved. But then he never did have much patience with happy endings. ●

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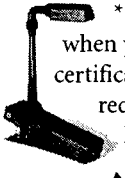

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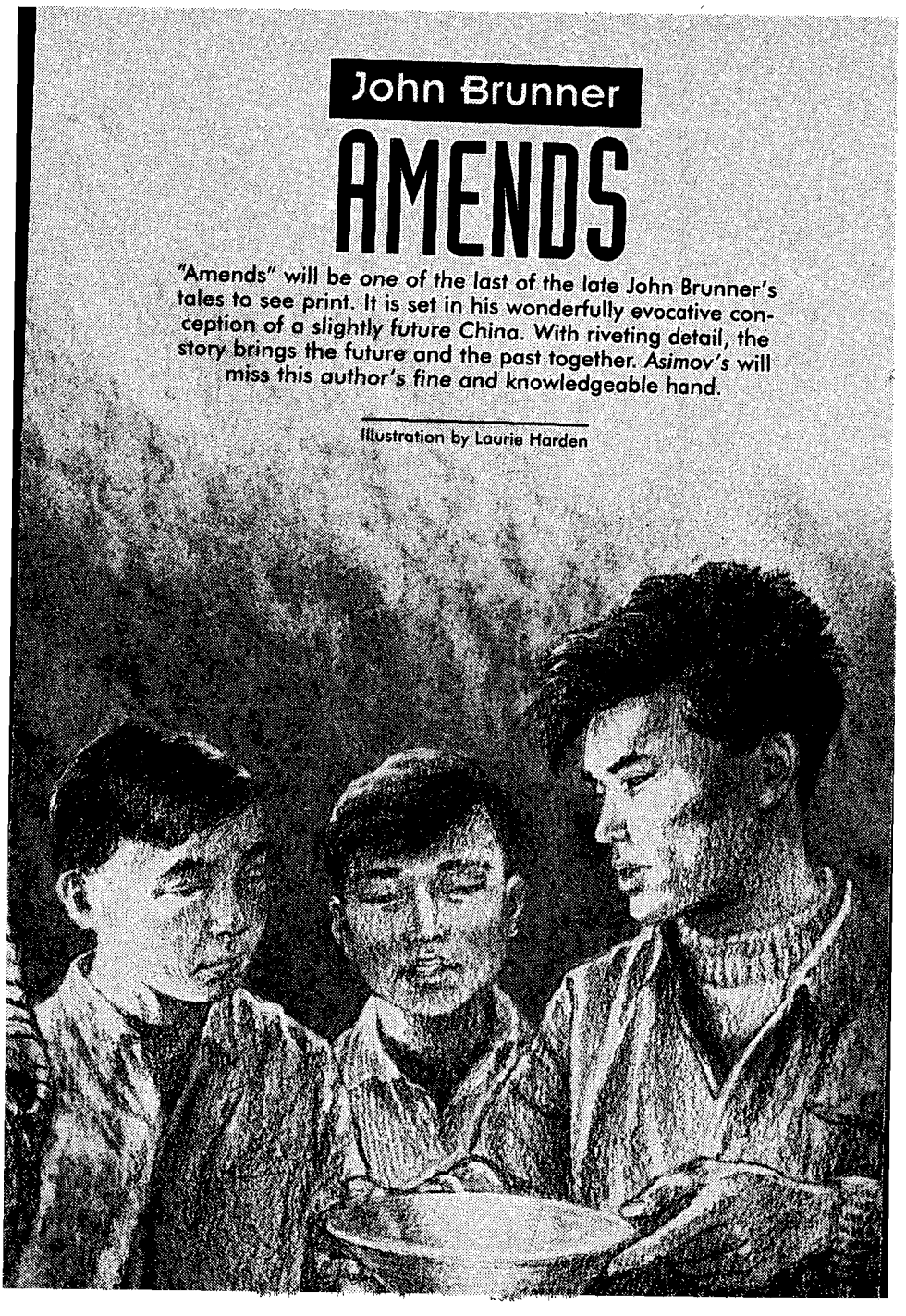
John Brunner

AMENDS

"Amends" will be one of the last of the late John Brunner's tales to see print. It is set in his wonderfully evocative conception of a slightly future China. With riveting detail, the story brings the future and the past together. *Asimov's* will miss this author's fine and knowledgeable hand.

Illustration by Laurie Harden



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There was only one way to approach the Duke of Shan closely enough for an assassination attempt, and that was to become a member of his bodyguard. This murderer was patient. He had enlisted three years ago. Afterward he admitted under torture to being the son of an official dismissed by the duke for peculation, who had been obliged by his disgraced father to swear an oath of vengeance.

Heng Yu-san, who was the captain of the guard, moved almost fast enough to knock away the killer's spear, but not quite. It pierced the duke in the side just below his ribs and thrust deep and slightly upward. Heng had seen enough such wounds on the field of battle to know at once that his master was doomed.

So was he.

When the duke had been borne to his private quarters and doctors summoned to attend him, Heng unbuckled his sword and handed it to his sergeant, then tore off and threw to the ground the embroidered silk picture of a dragon that constituted his badge of rank. Accepting neither food nor drink, he waited all day and all night at the end of the passageway that led to the duke's suite, his face a mask of stone. He ignored the comings and goings about him: Taoist priests and their more recent rivals the Buddhists, courtiers conniving and conspiring, scholars hoping for lucrative work in drafting proclamations about the succession, calligraphers eager to make the necessary copies, even builders and carvers seeking commissions to complete the duke's tomb. In accordance with custom it had been commenced on his accession, but it was far from finished.

When servants came to douse the lamps, for greyish dawn-light had begun to wash the sky, he stirred to inquire of those who had been admitted to his bedside whether the duke was awake and well enough to speak.

Meaning it kindly enough, the senior doctor, whom Heng had first known as a surgeon's apprentice in the army when they were both no more than half their present age, drew him apart and advised him to flee while he could.

"He would never blame you, nor punish you," the doctor said. "He knows you for a good and loyal servant. But the new duke will want to lay the fault at someone's door, and who more convenient than the commander of the guard? If I were you, old friend—"

"All I asked," Heng interrupted, "was whether the duke is able to talk."

The doctor sighed. "Yes, he's conscious, though in great pain and very weak."

"I want to see him. I have something important to say."

Another sigh. "Very well. Let me accompany you—"

"No, I must do this by myself. Just tell the sentries it's all right for me to go in."

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Doubtful, but recognizing obstinacy when he met it, the doctor did as he was bid. A minute later Heng was performing the kowtow on one of the luxurious carpets that had been spread to spare the dying man's ears the sound of even the faintest footfall. Those already in the room scowled and muttered, no doubt thinking it would have been more befitting had this man, having failed in his charge, been summarily put to death in the old way.

"On your feet, Captain," the duke instructed, his normal booming voice reduced to a pain-racked whisper. "No human being could have done more to ensure my safety. You need not beg forgiveness."

Heng remained kneeling. "My lord, I did not come for that," he replied.

"What, then?"

"You have been generous to me before. Now I request one more favor."

The duke stared, face drawn tight with agony against yellow silken pillows. "Did I hear correctly?" he said after a pause. The others present hissed with indrawn breath at what they took for a monstrous act of presumption.

"You did." Sweat was running down Heng's mustache and trickling from the ends. "I crave the chance to make amends."

"Huh!" someone said loudly and dismissively in the background. As clearly as though he had used words, the sound summed up the opinion of all the listeners. After such a dereliction of duty, what amends were possible?

"I know what punishment best suits my negligence," Heng continued doggedly. "When they close your tomb I want to be within. I want to guard you better in the world to come than I achieved in this one. Concede this final boon!"

The duke began to chuckle, then to laugh. Abruptly, however, his next intake of breath turned into a bubbling gasp. Blood leaked from the corners of his mouth. His eyes rolled upward in their sockets. Those in attendance rushed forward, thrusting Heng aside. Withdrawing to the side of the room, the captain watched and waited for the inevitable.

It came in moments. The doctors let their shoulders droop and turned away.

"Well, then, my lord"—but Heng was speaking too softly for any living soul to hear—"since you have not had time to grant the boon I'll grant it to myself."

Accordingly, when the tomb, burrowed into a hillside overlooking the lands he had long and justly ruled, had been provided with all the goods so great a noble as a duke deserved to take into the life hereafter, silk and porcelain and jade, a chariot with harness the equal of any belonging to the emperor, swords and knives and great bronze pots the shape of tortoises, he had himself roped to a beam above its threshold, in his hand a sword, around his neck an engraved ivory tablet that named him and

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described his shame. His friend the doctor offered him a tincture of opium that would have sent him rapidly to sleep. He signed refusal.

After that they heaped up rocks and earth and went away.

When Joe emerged from the Ying-so police station into the wan light of early evening, wearing a carefully chastened expression, his two best friends were waiting for him on the sidewalk opposite. Like most of the teenagers in town, along with western clothes sent by relatives in Hong Kong or bought at inflated prices in Shenzen, they had adopted westernized forms of their names, or tried to. Some were simple to convert, like his own Zho into Joe and Li which easily became Lee, but the best Quan had been able to come up with was Ken.

Before crossing the road he had to pause while a smoky, dust-covered bus trundled by, the last of the day from the provincial capital Men-lo. By the time it drew into the station on the far side of the square he judged himself to be relatively safe from surveillance and relaxed his features into a grin that mingled cynicism with disgust.

"What did Fuxi want this time?" Ken muttered as they strode away in the direction of the Happiness Bar, which was their regular hangout. He meant Inspector Ren, the officer with special responsibility for juvenile crime, who would have been furious at being referred to by his given name.

"Said I'd been flashing a lot of cash lately," Joe grunted. "Wanted to know how I came by it."

"Who shopped you?" Lee demanded nervously. "Ma?" The latter was a cadet in the area militia of the suburb they all hailed from, about their own age, self-righteous, self-important, and officious—in their view, at least. In Ren's, he was a model citizen.

Joe shrugged. "More than likely."

"Did Fuxi accuse you of dealing dope?"

"Not in so many words. But I could tell the idea was going through his head."

Lee sighed, plainly dreaming of the fortune that would derive from bringing a kilo of heroin into Ying-so without being caught. But he was forever chasing rainbows. The others looked at him scornfully, having no wish to face the muzzles of a firing squad.

"So what did you say?" Ken pressed.

"I told him I'd won it at pool." Joe grinned. "Said I'm the best pool-player in town. He said that's because you waste all your time on it instead of getting a proper job. So I said in other countries they have professional players and they earn a hell of a lot more than you ever will and I'm practicing against the day the same can happen here. That made him really stroppy. He was half out of his chair when he remembered what would happen if he hit me. So he cursed a bit and shouted they should turn me

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loose." His grin became positively diabolical. "I won't repeat what he's promised to do if I'm arrested again."

"Maybe," said Lee with unexpected irony, "it's as well there was only one of that bowl we found, that fetched such a price in Men-lo. If Ma had tipped off the fuzz about all three of us being too flush—"

"He's right," Ken chimed in. He was always the cautious one. "Be a bit more careful, Joe."

"I will."

After which they covered the remaining distance to the bar in silence, unable to resist picturing how rich they could have been made had they discovered something better than a single antique bowl. But they had searched the area and found nothing else.

Still, it had fetched an amazing price.

"Think we ought to go back anyway?" Ken suggested. "We *might* have missed something."

"Sure. But not right away. It might make us conspicuous. Visits to the valley aren't part of our regular activity pattern nowadays." Joe had learned about that aspect of detective work from watching American programs on satellite TV, Beijing's attempt to ban private dishes having been quietly abandoned, and no matter how much the Ying-so police might be disliked they were not by any means fools.

After downing a bowl of noodles apiece by way of supper, they repaired to the pool table so that Joe might reinforce the yarn he had spun to Ren. They were on their third game and it was Lee's turn to be marker when the latter, glancing through the window, uttered an exclamation. It caused Joe to muff his shot—not that it mattered, for he was ahead by more points than remained on the table. Startled, they looked up and saw what Lee had spotted, a large black car drawing to a halt before the police station. Private cars of any kind being still a rarity in Ying-so, as throughout China bar the big cities, their minds were instantly filled anew with visions of wealth and luxury. Abandoning their game, they hastened to take a closer look at it.

Not too close, of course. One man had gotten out, but to enter the police station, a place Joe had no special desire to revisit, presumably seeking directions. That left two others inside. The driver was a surly looking type in a peaked cap, eyeing not just them but everything and everybody with unwavering suspicion. And, lounging in the back seat, a man of forty or so, wearing clothes as western as the boys' but of a totally different style: an impeccably tailored grey silk suit, a white silk shirt, a brilliantly patterned silk tie, mostly emerald and orange, an enormous gold watch on his wrist. . . . All this they saw despite the dimness inside the car when he lit a cigarette with a gold lighter.

The instant he realized the boys were looking at him, he snapped it shut.

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The third man returned. Slipping back into the seat beside the driver, he gave directions for the only passable hotel in town. Almost silently the great car purred away, aura'ed by visions of a world the boys knew solely from cinema and television where everyone owned a car, everyone ate in smart restaurants, everyone could afford beautiful prostitutes, sometimes even round-eye ones. . . . There was such a shortage of women in Ying-so, none of the trio had ever had even an ugly girlfriend.

After that the idea of playing pool no longer seemed attractive. Disconsolately they separated and went home, knowing they would rendezvous at the same place again tomorrow.

What else was there to do?

That night before sleep they all recalled the discovery, three weeks ago, which had kept them during the past ten days far better off than even the best night Joe had ever managed at the pool table. There was a narrow but pretty valley some three kilometers from the town, with a brook trickling through it, where at this time of year one could gather wild fruit. They had chanced on the place in boyhood, and managed to preserve it pretty much as their private domain despite the area's dense population, for no track or path led into it and access could only be gained by scrambling over a mass of tumbled boulders. As they still occasionally did, they wandered back to it for lack of funds and, consequently, any more interesting pastime. None of them having paid much attention to geography lessons at school, or indeed any other of their studies, they were unequipped to discern that it had once been deeper and even steeper-sided but erosion had loosened rocks and washed soil from its slopes until its floor was more or less level.

What Joe spotted, and what turned out to be so profitable, was a shallow round bowl, not much bigger than the palm of his hand. His eyes were on the ground because they had to pick their way across the valley with care, partly to avoid thorns and partly because, thanks to the brook, the going was always marshy except in the driest month of summer.

Wondering if his find might be of interest, he carried it to the stream and rinsed it clean. Catching sight of what he was doing, the others came to join him. Lee's immediate reaction was typically scornful: "Oh, it's only a bit of crockery! Chuck it away!"

Ken, though, intervened. "Shut up, bellyhead! Just because you can't eat it. . . . May I?"

Joe handed it over. Turning it around slowly in his fingers, Ken began to nod. "It isn't even cracked. And I never saw a bowl that shade of green. Did you?"

Lee made to say something else dismissive, but Joe scowled him down.

"No, I never did. And the white flower pattern is kind of pretty, too."

"Pretty!" Lee hooted at the sissy word, and instantly found them both glaring at him.

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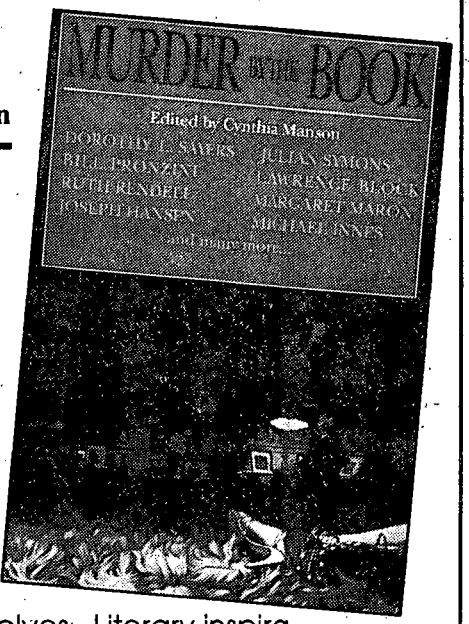
Death Between the Covers

MURDER BY THE BOOK

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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"Well, of course, if you're not interested in sharing the proceeds . . ." Joe said at length.

"What proceeds?"

Patiently, as though spelling out the obvious to an idiot, Ken explained. "No one lives here nowadays, right? Nobody has done for a long time. Or hadn't you noticed?"

Lee bridled but controlled his fists.

"So this bowl could be quite old, couldn't it?"

Comprehension began to round Lee's mouth.

"And if it's old," Joe supplied, "it might be valuable . . . I think light is beginning to penetrate the fog this dummy prefers to a brain. Ken, didn't you say something about your parents going to Men-lo some time soon?"

"Yes, for my mother's cousin's birthday."

"Think they'd take you along? I've heard about a dealer there who offers good prices."

It was true. Ken returned, bubbling with excitement, and divided among them the equivalent of a month's wages for the best-paid worker in Ying-so. The dealer, he announced, wanted anything similar that they found, promising even better prices and no questions asked. In consequence they went back at the first opportunity, but after hunting all day found nothing and were driven to conclude that any other valuables must have been removed long ago.

They felt tantalized, nonetheless. Certainly the money they had received had been welcome . . . but most had already evaporated, for though Ken had counseled it, they dared not open savings accounts or anything similar that might attract official attention, and the sum was too small for anything truly ambitious like starting up a business.

Besides, thrown together as they had been in childhood by the sole factor they had in common, parents who seemed not to care that they had won the precious gamble of their one-per-family children being boys and took negligible interest in their offspring, none of them was inclined for the same slow, laborious, mind-numbing course through life that their elders had been compelled to. Their dreams were of lottery-winners, rock musicians rendered millionaires by a talent-spotter, actors graduating via Hong Kong to Hollywood, even romantic criminals such as Tong and Triad hitmen—anything other than the drab and circumscribed existence that dunderheads like Ma preferred to put up with.

Therefore having had a taste of wealth acquired by chance they felt a mute and inexpressible resentment: as it were, *Instead of one, why could we not have found a thousand and been famous?*

It lurked in wait, like a grumbling appendix or a dormant peptic ulcer. Already they were more inclined to snap at one another than a month ago.

* * *

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Next morning, on his way to the Happiness Bar, Joe grew suddenly aware that someone was keeping pace with him along the crowded streets. Glancing round, he recognized the driver and front seat passenger from the big black car.

On being spotted, they took advantage of his momentary hesitation to quicken their steps and fall in on either side. He felt a dreadful tightening in his belly.

"Your name Zho?" the driver rasped. His voice was as hostile as his expression and that had not sweetened since last night.

"Uh—" Joe's mouth was abruptly desert-dry.

"He doesn't match the description," the passenger objected.

For an instant Joe's spirits lightened. They were immediately dashed again.

"There are supposed to be three of them. Maybe it wasn't him but one of his chums."

"Yes, of course."

"Do you want something?" Joe blurted. His voice emerged high and shrill and embarrassing.

"No"—from the driver.

"Then why—?"

"You do. Mr. Ng wants to offer you tea. And you want to accept."

"Who's Mr. Ng?" By now Joe's eyes were rolling wildly in search of escape, but these two were plainly experienced in their work. Without his realizing they had got him on the move again, away from the Happiness (which he could see Lee and Ken approaching from different directions) and toward the Great Wall, a much smarter establishment as far as possible from the bus station whose prices were the highest in town. It boasted a verandah running the entire length of the frontage. And there, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, eyes shielded this morning behind dark glasses, was the man from the back of the car, sipping tea.

Stumbling on the step, Joe felt himself forced toward the stranger.

"This one's Zho," the passenger said. "We found him making for that bar in the square, just as we'd been told."

Told? Who by? Not that meddlesome bastard Ma again!

"And his sidekicks?" Mr. Ng's voice—somehow it would have felt wrong to omit the Mr.—was light but authoritative.

"They generally turn up around the same time," the driver said. "I'll go keep an eye out for them."

"You do that," said Mr. Ng, not without a trace of irony, adding as the driver departed, "Chu, what's got into you? You haven't invited our guest to sit down, you haven't poured him any tea." He brought his masked gaze to bear on Joe, who felt it wise not to delay longer before taking the indicated chair. When the tea was poured its aroma was so powerful it seemed to scent the whole street. He mumbled thanks.

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At the third sip Joe's lurching heart calmed despite the disquieting blank stare fixed on him. By now Chu had taken the chair on his other side. With the table in front of him he felt hemmed in, almost trapped. No doubt that was how he was supposed to feel.

"Mr.—Mr. Ng?" he ventured. "What. . . ?" But he ran out of voice.

Ng made a tiny gesture with one finger. Chu produced and held where Joe could see it an oblong piece of paper, white on one side, shiny on the other. A color photograph. Of a green bowl. Of the green bowl he had found? Of another like it?

"You recognize this?" Ng said in a soft tone, purring like his car.

Joe's mouth remained locked.

"I think you do. But I'm sure you don't know what it is."

He added the second sentence at precisely the right moment. Joe had been poised to launch a vigorous denial, but the temptation to learn more about the so-valuable bowl proved too great. He realized, much against his will, that he had come up against a man of power. Not even the teachers who had sometimes bent him to their bidding at school had possessed this kind of dominance.

"Tell him, Chu."

"Excuse me, but"—trying to catch feathers in a windstorm—"what makes you think I may be interested?"

It was a gallant effort, but met the contempt that was all it deserved. Ng waited to be sure he had finished, then nodded to Chu again.

"It's greenware from the time of the last but one Duke of Shan. The glaze was developed in this area and nowhere else. So much was it admired, the duke was authorized to pay half his tribute to the emperor in this kind of porcelain. . . . You follow me so far?" He interrupted himself, glaring like a schoolmaster suspecting a pupil of letting his mind wander. In fact Joe had been shaken by the term duke. He knew as little of history as of the other subjects he had been exposed to but not learned; however, he was vaguely aware that dukes had been nearly as powerful as emperors and rich enough to possess servants, even possibly slaves. Hastily he donned a more attentive expression.

"But of course it never happened," Chu resumed.

Timidly: "How was that?"

"The duke was murdered, his successor proved to be an incompetent weakling, and this whole area fell under foreign occupation. The secret of the greenware was lost. What examples survived were looted and scattered all over everywhere. They've been dug up as far away as Turkey."

Joe waited.

"Which is why this one you found—"

"Just a moment, please! Why do you say that?"

He had addressed Chu, but it was his master who answered. Removing his dark glasses to reveal eyes as cold and calculating as a snake's

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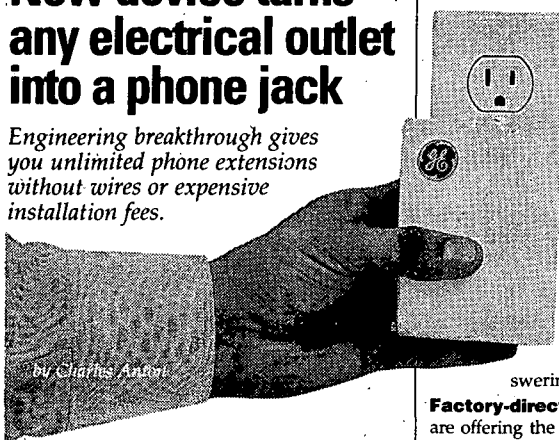
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

New device turns any electrical outlet into a phone jack

Engineering breakthrough gives you unlimited phone extensions without wires or expensive installation fees.



by Charles Anton

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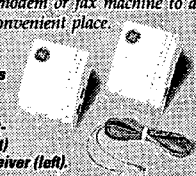

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about to strike, he said in a quietly dangerous tone, "Because three of the young men in this town have recently been splashing more money about than they can account for, and you're one of them."

I was right! They must have found their way to Ma! But how? They only arrived last night!

"And don't," Chu supplemented softly, "claim you won it all at pool."

While Joe was still struggling to find an answer, the driver returned with Ken and Lee in tow. It was clear from their bright, excited faces that they had no idea what was really going on. As far as they were concerned, Joe had managed to ingratiate himself with the owner of that splendid car and wanted to share his luck with his friends. He froze.

"The one on the left?" Ng murmured as they approached.

"Matches the description the dealer gave us."

"I thought so. . . ." Raising his voice: "Good morning! Come and join your friend! Waiter! More chairs! More tea! And bring the dim sum cart!"

Enthusiastically seating himself, Lee caught sight of the photo on the table. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Is that the bowl we found?"

Quicker-witted Ken kicked him on the shin, but it was too late. Joe tried not to notice the smug look on Chu's face. Ng, of course, remained impassive. And nothing more was said until the snacks and tea had been delivered and the waiter was again out of earshot.

Whereupon: "I don't think we need waste any more time," Chu proposed. Still rubbing his leg in annoyance, Lee abruptly realized he had missed some sort of point and bit back the words he had meant to utter. They all turned to Ng, who signified assent. Chu drew a deep breath.

"Very well. I don't know how much you youngsters know about the history of your county? Probably not a lot." He was doing his best to be chummy and affable but he wasn't very good at it. "As I was just explaining to your friend. . . ."

He repeated what he had said about the greenware. Not only Lee's eyes, but Ken's as well, rounded enormously at reference to the duke who had ruled this land so long ago. Lee couldn't bridle his tongue. He butted in.

"Did this guy have pottery soldiers buried with him, like at Xian?"

"We don't know."

"What?"

"We don't know," Chu repeated patiently. "We do know he was buried in this general area, but his tomb has never been located, and during the excesses of the Cultural Revolution what records might with modern techniques have yielded up more clues were destroyed or lost. So—"

By now Lee's eyes were positively bulging. "You mean that bowl could once have been in the tomb of a duke?"

"Scarcely!" Chu exclaimed. "Who would want that message in his grave?"

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Joe and Ken were hopelessly confused, and looked it. Ng said sternly, "Chu! Not everyone is an archeologist, you know!"

"What?"—blinking. Then: "Oh! I don't suppose you can read the inscription."

"Inscription?" Joe echoed. "You mean that flower design is writing?"

"Yes, very stylized but . . ." A cough from Ng recalled Chu from his obvious urge to deliver a lecture. "At any rate it says something like, 'Draw hither, all you ghosts and devils, and eat your fill.' "

Stunned, the three boys wordlessly concurred. Who'd care to have that in his tomb?

Having relished their bafflement for a moment, Chu smiled. He wasn't very good at that, either. "No, it wouldn't have been in the tomb. But it could very well have been placed outside, with offerings in it, to distract evil spirits. As the rulers of his day went, the duke seems to have been relatively enlightened. Certainly after this county was overrun by barbarian invaders he must have seemed like the god of good luck compared with the conquerors."

Ken and Joe exchanged glances. They had both come to the same conclusion: they were in a strong bargaining position. These strangers wanted to know where the bowl had been found. Not only could the boys lead them to the place; they could demand a fair share of whatever was unearthed. They were going to become rich after all.

Except that Lee could not control his tongue.

Seeming not to have listened to the last few exchanges, he suddenly announced, "I know where it must be!"

Hearts sinking, his friends snapped their heads around to counsel silence, but he didn't notice.

"It must have been washed to where we found it by the stream. And that flows down the valley from the cliff at the end we've never properly explored, because of all the thorns and brambles. I bet that's where the duke is buried!"

He glanced, beaming, at his friends. But their glares spelled murder. Only Chu and the driver, who had been sitting a little apart but hanging on every word, looked satisfied and optimistic.

Ng, however, bestowed a slow glance first on Joe and then on Ken that somehow managed to convey that he too had had trouble with over-talkative subordinates. Joe felt a thrill run down his spine.

For the first time he had been exposed to the real temptation of power.

Perhaps that sensation was what lent him the courage to address Ng, all of a sudden, in terms appropriate to an equal. He said, having shortcut a dozen passages of argument:

"But you still need us to lead you there."

Ng straightened, instantly alert. He had registered the change.

"Go on," he invited after a pause.

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"If we don't . . . well, we all know what you would do, there being so much at stake." Joe licked his lips, astonished at himself. Irrelevantly he registered that Lee was the only one of the company who had eaten his dim sum; the rest were congealing on their little dishes. "But you couldn't believe what we told you. We made up an agreed story when we first discovered it as kids. I'm sure we all remember it."

Lee nodded vigorously.

"But if we do . . . what's in it for us? I can't see signing contracts for a percentage of everything that you dig up before the government adds two and two and sends the army. We're already aware of what happens when someone like me starts to spend too many ren-min-bi. Would you have the patience—and the honesty!—to keep our share in trust until the fuss dies down, then help us get away to Shanghai or Shenzen or out of China altogether?"

He was breathing hard, so hard he was almost gasping. But he drove on to his peroration for fear Ken out of excessive caution or Lee out of sheer stupidity might ruin it.

"I think not! What I do think, though, is that for the first time in my life I have met a person who has crossed the two-plank bridge!"

And there it was: a gamble based on a chance reference in a sensational Hong Kong TV program, that his friends belatedly reacted to.

A gamble won. Ng's snake eyes creased above a smile more genuine than Chu's.

"If that is what you want, then you shall have it. There will not have been a candidate in fifty years who brought a more valuable gift to his initiation."

Chu gasped audibly. Even the driver, who had been scowling like a mask, let his guard down and gaped.

Ng rose. Anticipating a warning that sprang to Joe's lips, he said, "I was a country boy too. . . . How close can we get by car? What shall we need? Where can we get it? And will your absence be remarked—except by the staff of the Happiness Bar?"

The smiling crease around his eyes remained. Joe checked silently with his friends, and found they had recognized his inspiration, and approved.

"What we have in common," he stated solemnly, "is that our families don't care what happens to us. Lee's parents are dead and he lodges with a resentful aunt and uncle. As for Ken and me . . . well, my dad's a drunk and his is a gambler. We could be gone from Ying-so for a week before they thought to ask around among the neighbors."

Ng inclined his head a little. "That is not uncommon among those who join us. We offer a better, although stricter, sort of family. . . . Are you agreed?"

"To what?" Lee whispered, only faintly aware that crucial decisions were being taken on his behalf.

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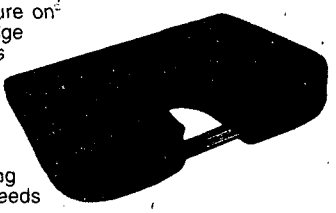

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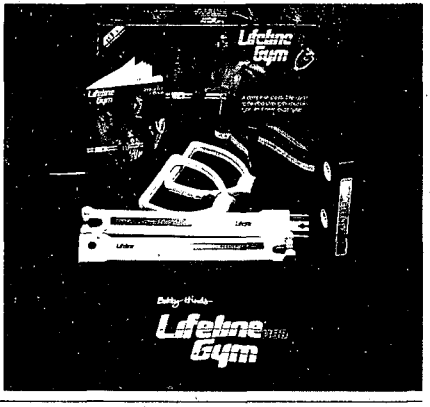

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"To entering the City of Willows!" Joe snapped, making sure even so that he spoke too softly for the other customers, or even the circulating waiters, to catch his words. Ng nodded surprised approval, as more improbably did Chu and the driver.

Lee's mouth rounded. But they had talked so often of how life would be transformed could they only be inducted into a Triad. . . .

Ken said eventually, "We can show you the nearest approach by road. Past that you'll need good boots and lots of patience."

When he realized there was no way all six of them could fit in Ng's car, large though it was, Lee looked so downcast the others told him he could act as guide while they made their way direct across country. That meant the car would be there first despite the poor state of the road, but Ng said he had a number of purchases to make before leaving town and instructed them to go ahead.

On the way to the rendezvous Joe and Ken spoke little, but every now and then they glanced at one another and grinned.

They arrived long enough before the car to smoke a cigarette apiece. Joe was just crushing his out when he caught sight of an approaching cloud of dust. Ken hastily tossed his own butt aside and they ran forward to help open the doors. The nature of at least some of what Ng had bought was instantly apparent. Part of the back seat could be folded down to let long items protrude forward from the trunk, and they recognized a hoe and a long-handled billhook.

The trunk also yielded an ax, a hatchet, a pair of bolt-cutters, a couple of spades, heavy canvas gloves, overalls that the visitors soberly donned to protect their clothes, and just the kind of boots Joe had had in mind, and into which they likewise changed. . . . Lee whispered to his friends as they stood apart, watching, "They're carrying enough to buy Ying-so twice over!"

Then followed knapsacks, three empty that they kept themselves, three full, though it wasn't possible to discern what with, that they gave the boys. They proved heavy but totable. There were also powerful flashlights, while the driver slung over his shoulder a camera with a flashgun and Chu did the same with a cassette recorder and a bag of spare tapes. Joe couldn't help wondering whether Ng was exempted from a similar extra burden by mere seniority or whether it was because he already carried equipment of another kind.

He suspected the latter, but could detect no sign of it.

Last of all the driver—by now they had heard his name, which was Gwo—shut and locked the car and groped under one of the wheel-arches.

Inevitably Lee wanted to know what for. With the nearest to a smile he had thus far grudged Gwo invited him to touch one of the door-handles. He leapt back with a squeal as the lights flashed and the horn ut-

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tered shrieks like an infuriated wildcat. Even Ng betrayed faint amusement.

And then ordered them onward.

Citified he might be, but there was nothing soft about this man. He scrambled energetically to the top of the ridge of fallen rocks that had so long excluded almost everyone from the valley, surveyed the view, and pointed to the far end, saying, "Is that the thornbrake you meant?"

Joe nodded.

"Chu?"

"It fits what few clues have survived."

"Right."

And led the way toward it.

The weather had been relatively dry since the visit that had yielded the greenware bowl, so the going was less marshy than usual. However, fed from a source much higher up the hill, the brook ran as freely as ever. Pausing on its bank Chu demanded, "Is it safe to drink?"

Joe shrugged as best he could under the weight of the knapsack. "We never took any harm."

"I see." He shaded his eyes. "No one living up there, so no sewage. No one farming or gardening, so no manure, let alone chemical fertilizers. . . . Yes, this could very well be the sort of site to escape discovery."

Daringly: "You sound as though you have quite a clear idea of what you're looking for."

"So I should. I was trained as an archeologist."

Joe noticed the turn of phrase: "was trained" rather than the more usual "trained," but forbore to comment. After a moment Chu trudged on. Mostly to himself he muttered, "And much good did it do me."

However, he didn't offer to elucidate.

Before midday they reached the point beyond which the boys had never ventured. From here to the nearly vertical slope of the hillside beyond loomed a huge tangled barrier of vegetation, mostly creepers, briars, and thorns. Ng contemplated it for a moment, then turned back to the brook and bent to drink from his cupped hands. The others copied him, for with the sun high and the sky nearly cloudless they were all thirsty.

Joe found himself wondering whether one of the knapsacks contained food and drink. It appeared certain. Ng seemed to have made provision for just about all eventualities. And emphasized the fact by telling the others to set down their loads and calling for a pair of gloves and the bolt-cutters. They proved ideal for dealing with the finger-thick stems. The others hauling them out of the way with gloved hands, he made a sort of tunnel deep into the brake before encountering obstacles too thick for the cutters. At that stage, sweating liters, he decreed a short break. Joe's suspicion was confirmed. His own knapsack contained thermos flasks of tea and lunches of positively Japanese frugality: cold boiled rice and salt-dried radish.

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The brief meal ended, Ng detailed Ken and Lee to take over with hatchets, but himself continued helping to drag the stems and branches clear.

Joe caught Ken's eye and gave an approving nod. They had both gathered from films that in theory Triad bosses only retained respect so long as they were willing to share whatever hardships they ordained for their underlings. It was one thing, though, to be told so in the context of a drama, and moreover one made in Hong Kong rather than China itself; another entirely to see someone putting the principle into practice who must at least be a White Paper Fan if not indeed an Incense Master!

They redoubled their efforts in consequence, even though they were far from sure that Lee, who kept falling back and demanding a moment's rest, was making the sort of impression that would incline Ng to include him in the eventual execution of this morning's promise.

The sun declined; the light began to dim; and still there remained many meters of stems and spikes between them and the hillside. Chu had voiced the risk that they might have to return to Ying-so and resume work in the morning, and Gwo and Ng had exchanged resigned glances and indicated possible agreement, when Joe, charging onward because he was determined to outshine Lee at least and if possible Ken as well, uttered a cry of excitement.

"It's all dead!"

For a moment the others failed to register the import. In seconds, though, they caught on to what he meant. Beneath the dense canopy most of the plants had died from lack of light, and from this point on they didn't even have to slash with the billhook. The stems were so dry they broke under the mere impact of a stick. Despite the dust that made their eyes water, their throats burn and their mouths taste foul, they could advance, beating and trampling, all the way to the hillside, though the going became treacherous as though they were traversing an unseen heap of builders' rubble.

And suddenly there was a half-visible arch of carved stone, too steep and too smooth for the dead creepers to have kept their grip on. Its last concealment tumbled to the ground in a single tangled mass like a mattress made from spider-legs.

Chu let out a cry of excitement, though all three boys were at a loss for words. Even Lee, out of breath, could do no more than attempt a gasp.

Ng advanced, switching on the flashlight which the decline of the sun now rendered necessary. Chu began to speak in a rapid tone.

"There's been some settlement, probably due to the brook rather than earth tremors, but if I read the signs aright the water must have changed its course. It looks as though it washed away the earth heaped up against the entrance, but was diverted before causing any damage to the actual tomb. There would have been rocks blocking access, too, which is why the

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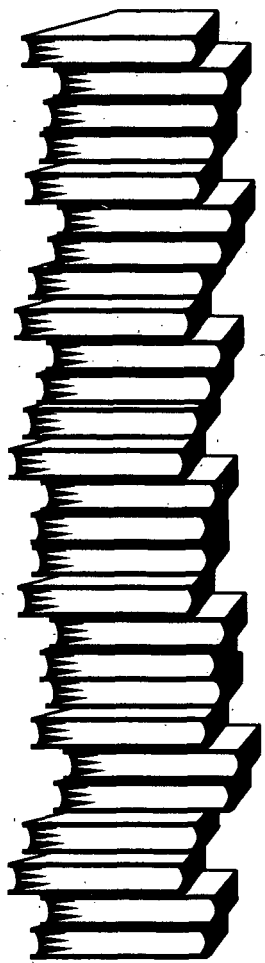

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going has been so rough these past few meters. Perhaps it was the subsiding of this lot that blocked the old stream-bed. However that may be it's a tremendous stroke of luck. Now either side of the arch there ought to be low plinths, stretching forward, for people to leave offerings like what would have been in that greenware bowl. . . ." He prodded with the handle of the hoe, and gave a satisfied nod as it struck solidity.

"Gwo, let me have the other flashlight."

It was promptly delivered and focused on the opening below the arch.

"I thought so. There was a wooden barrier. You can't call it a door because it was never meant to be opened again." He thrust with the reversed hoe. "But termites got at it, I suppose. There's nothing to impede our entry except dead creepers."

Switching off the light, shouldering the hoe like an old-fashioned long-barreled gun, he turned with deference and a change of voice to face Ng.

"In my opinion, sir, we have indeed located the tomb of the Duke of Shan."

"Wow!" Lee burst out. "I'm going to be a millionaire!"

"Shut up!" Joe shouted. The same thought was in his mind, and Ken's no doubt, but now they had served their purpose as guides their new companions were quite capable of leaving them to rot among the nearby undergrowth, so he was eager to make the best possible impression on Ng. Already resigned to the probability that Lee was too much of a fool to make it through a Triad initiation, Joe went on, "For all we know it was plundered hundreds of years ago! Stop daydreaming and do something constructive—like ripping down this stuff that's still blocking our view!"

"Right," murmured Ng, and there was a world of menace in the single syllable.

Stung, Lee strode forward, settling his canvas gloves around his wrists, snatched the dangling strands and gave an almighty tug. Like the one that had concealed the entry, this mass came away all of an intermeshing piece and he nearly lost his balance. The others made no move to help him. Their flashlight beams were already disclosing marvels. Cobweb-draped but tantalizing, there were jars and chests and statues and weapons and . . .

And no end of what could not be guessed at!

After a long pause Ng said in curiously strained tones, "Your name is . . . Li, is that not right? Since you have revealed these marvels to us, it seems fitting that you should enter the tomb first."

Lee's face gleamed for a moment like light on oil, but his excitement didn't last. Casting his eyes groundward, he whispered, "I think, sir, that you who provided the means to bring us here. . . ."

The words died. But all of them, more or less scornfully, had deduced what lay behind the refusal. Lee was less covetous of great wealth than he was afraid of the spirits who might haunt such a place as this.

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Should he offer to take the first step? Joe considered the idea, then concluded it would be over-presumptuous. How much the films he had seen reflected the truth about Triad discipline he had small idea, but lacking any other guide it seemed sensible for him to behave as though they constituted an instruction manual. But his mental debate, shared by Ken as he could guess from the latter's expression, was cut short by Chu.

"Sir, the honor belongs to you alone, for recognizing the importance of the bowl this boy had brought for sale. Without such insight we might never have made our way here."

Ng was clearly not invulnerable to the weapons of flattery. . . .

"Switch on your flashlights," he commanded, set his shoulders, and proceeded cautiously to negotiate the rustling crunching stalks that marked the threshold of the tomb.

Its roof was unexpectedly lofty, twice the height of a man, and held up by a crossbeam that had warped perceptibly with the passage of time despite being supported in the middle by an upright one of similar thickness, for the latter had bowed like the leg of a rickety child. The air was stale and smelled of indefinable decay, but nothing noxious assailed them, not even the suffocating stench of bats' dung; the overarching vegetation must have baffled those reeking and sometimes vicious creatures too often met in any sort of natural or artificial cave. So one by one they followed, Lee last and timidest—which noticing, Gwo with a snort handed him his flashlight, telling him to keep it aimed to the front and level, then possessed himself of a leafy branch by way of a brush and set about removing dust and spider webs to facilitate Chu's inspection of what they had found.

Breathily he muttered a commentary on what was revealed.

"Oh, yes. Must be the duke's. Who else? This chest probably holds silks, or held, depending on how well sealed it is. Soapstone here, and valuable enough in its own right being so exquisitely carved, but that's jade over there and what's more a scarce color long mined out. There has to be bronze under this green tarnish—masses of it, most likely domestic utensils—but the color of that lot indicates silver and an amazing quantity of it. This is brass, harness fitments perhaps, but that yellow is so clear it must be gold even if it's only leaf or alloy. . . . Master!" He turned shining eyes to Ng, and a face that would have shone no less, from simple sweat, had the pervasive dust not made it matte. "You said no postulant in fifty years would have brought a finer present to his initiation than these boys here. At risk of contradicting you I'd say a century! If we can get away with this lot we stand to make *billions!*"

For an instant the very air twanged like the strings of a *p'i-p'a*, booming and resonating with naked greed. They surveyed their surroundings with awe—all of them, even Ng.

Lee, wheezing the word "gold" as though the prospect of riches had

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punched him in the belly, swayed and let the beam of his flashlight swing wildly upward. A second later when he recovered enough to arrest its motion his eyes by reflex followed it to what it showed. So did the others'.

He, though, was the first to scream.

Cruciform above their heads, silhouetted on the ceiling like a bomber in the circle of a searchlight, a human shape. There was black lank hair. There was skin as dry and taut as parchment. There were the twin dangling lines of a black mustache that dropped either side of yellow teeth, bared by the shrinkage of desiccated fat and muscle. There were rotten rags—it was far too late to say rotting—draped around distorted bones. This spectral figure grasped a naked sword. And as they stared . . . it moved.

Perhaps the motion was illusory, due only to the way Lee trembled before he threw down his flashlight and fled, while other beams of light from the hands of his alarmed companions swerved crazily across the walls and ceiling. But the motion that followed was genuine enough. What he saw, or imagined he did, was sufficiently alarming to make Ng jolt backward with an exclamation, thus blundering against the upright post in the middle of the cluttered floor. The impact broke the post as though it were not there, because the termites that had abolished the timber barrier across the entrance had not restricted their attentions. There followed a timeless moment during which Joe saw—was convinced he saw—and afterward would believe to his dying day that he had seen—

A smile, as naked as a smile could ever be, displayed by the withdrawal of both lips and cheeks, not hidden only framed by sidelines of mustache, turned upward recognizably not by muscles—none were left—but possibly by streaks trailed down from his decaying eyes upon the countenance of the sword-bearing watchman who fell headlong from the breaking beam.

And with his sword (but it could not be possible) slashed the left ear and much of his cheek from Mr. Ng who had just had time to tilt and turn his head, and penetrated on to let the blood loose from his carotid artery.

Foreknowledge of which, Joe felt convinced, had brought about that smile. . . .

Lee was already fleeing. So was Ken. He decided to do the same, wondering with a detached part of his mind whether sharing in the real world this kind of experience would bond the three of them even closer as in the many Hong Kong brotherhood movies they had seen, or whether—as he had suddenly come to fear—this impact of the greater world had already destroyed their friendship.

Not that it had formed for any especially honorable reason.

He hesitated, staring around. Like good sworn servants Gwo and Chu were striving to disentangle bleeding Ng from the embrace of his dead and withered assailant. For a moment he contemplated offering help, and started forward. But Gwo hurled something at him like a missile:

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pale and flat with rounded corners, an ivory plaque bearing some kind of inscription. . . .

"Get the hell out of the way!" the driver shrieked.

In the same second a fearful groan resounded, as though the very bowels of the hill were convulsing. A glance upward confirmed: though the just-fractured beam had been weakened by the termites it had still offered some trace of support. Now Ng had broken it, none remained.

Already reacting as mindlessly as a good Triad recruit to the order Gwo had shouted, Joe bent like a sprinter and hurled himself toward the entrance. Lee had vanished. Ken had too. Clutching the plaque in sweat-slippery hands, he charged out of the tomb. . . .

And instantly choked on the stench of smoke. Ahead lay wildfire. He froze, thinking how Ken had thrown away his cigarette instead of grinding it out.

While, behind . . .

Deprived of its tenuous prop, the tomb's roof slumped. The effect was like collapsing an enormous lung. Air buffeted him, fierce enough to blow him off his feet had he not without intention already been leaning and striding downhill. In near-complete darkness he stumbled through a dense thicket of unfelt thorns and as though clinging to a lifebelt kept his fingers cramped on what Gwo had thrown at him.

And heard ahead, seemingly amid the source of all this smoke, an incredible noise.

An instant later, with his eyes streaming so much he could barely see, he felt his arm seized.

Ken.

"Come on! Quick! The fire's spreading away from us at the moment but the wind may change without warning!"

Where's Lee? The question was on the tip of Joe's tongue when he realized he already knew the answer. In his friend's wake he clambered over the rocks guarding access to the valley and made what haste he could back to the road. By the time they reached it the smoke had combined with the racket from the car to attract people seemingly out of nowhere, many bearing spades and shovels with which they set about beating at the burning scrub and hurling earth over it. Lee, cheeks wet with tears, left off triggering the alarm. Its howls died, only to be replaced seconds later by the wail of a police siren. Ren emerged from the car as soon as it drew up, followed by Ma with an expression of smug satisfaction.

"All right, what have you been up to this time?" the inspector rapped.

None of the three had the will or the energy to deny the truth. When they had heard the boys out, the listeners also seemed stunned. The tomb of a legendary duke? Right here, under their very noses? And it had taken outsiders, gangsters, to locate it!

"I can hardly believe it," Ren said at length.

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"It's true, sir," Ma assured him. At some point Joe had relinquished his grip on the ivory plaque and the police cadet had been examining it by the car's lights. Officious prig he might be, but there was no denying he was a better scholar than the others. Hesitatingly, but with gathering confidence, he read out the account of Heng's failure and the dreadful sentence he had passed upon himself in consequence.

"And he did it," Joe heard himself whispering when the story was over. Ren glanced at him.

"Did what?"

"This time he didn't fail to guard his duke. He made amends."

That ghastly smile, as though in expectation of the robbers' doom . . .

"And so must you!" crowed Ma. Ren nodded.

"Yes, there's a charge to answer concerning sale of state property to a private dealer in Men-lo. I'll see you at the station first thing Monday."

"We're kind of tired," Lee ventured. "Any chance of a ride back to town?"

It was the sort of question only he would have been stupid enough to voice. Its effect, however, was surprising.

"All right, get in the back. For once you've done something right. Soon as we heard about these visitors we phoned Beijing. Chu was sacked by the State Institute of Archeology for making off with relics from its collection, and lucky to escape jail. Ng was his link to overseas buyers. And Gwo was suspected of at least two murders. The country is better off without people like that." He hesitated, then added reluctantly, "You may even get a commendation."

Angrily he slammed the door and started up.

But it wasn't us, Joe insisted silently, knowing the others would agree with him, though like him they would never mention it. Above all:

He wasn't smiling. Not when Lee first shone a light on him. Only after Ng stumbled back against the post.

Only when he realized that after all those centuries of waiting his chance had finally arrived.

Ahead loomed the few lights of Ying-so. The fire was dying at the barrier of the road. ●

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Suzy McKee Charnas

BEAUTY AND THE OPÉRA OR THE PHANTOM BEAST

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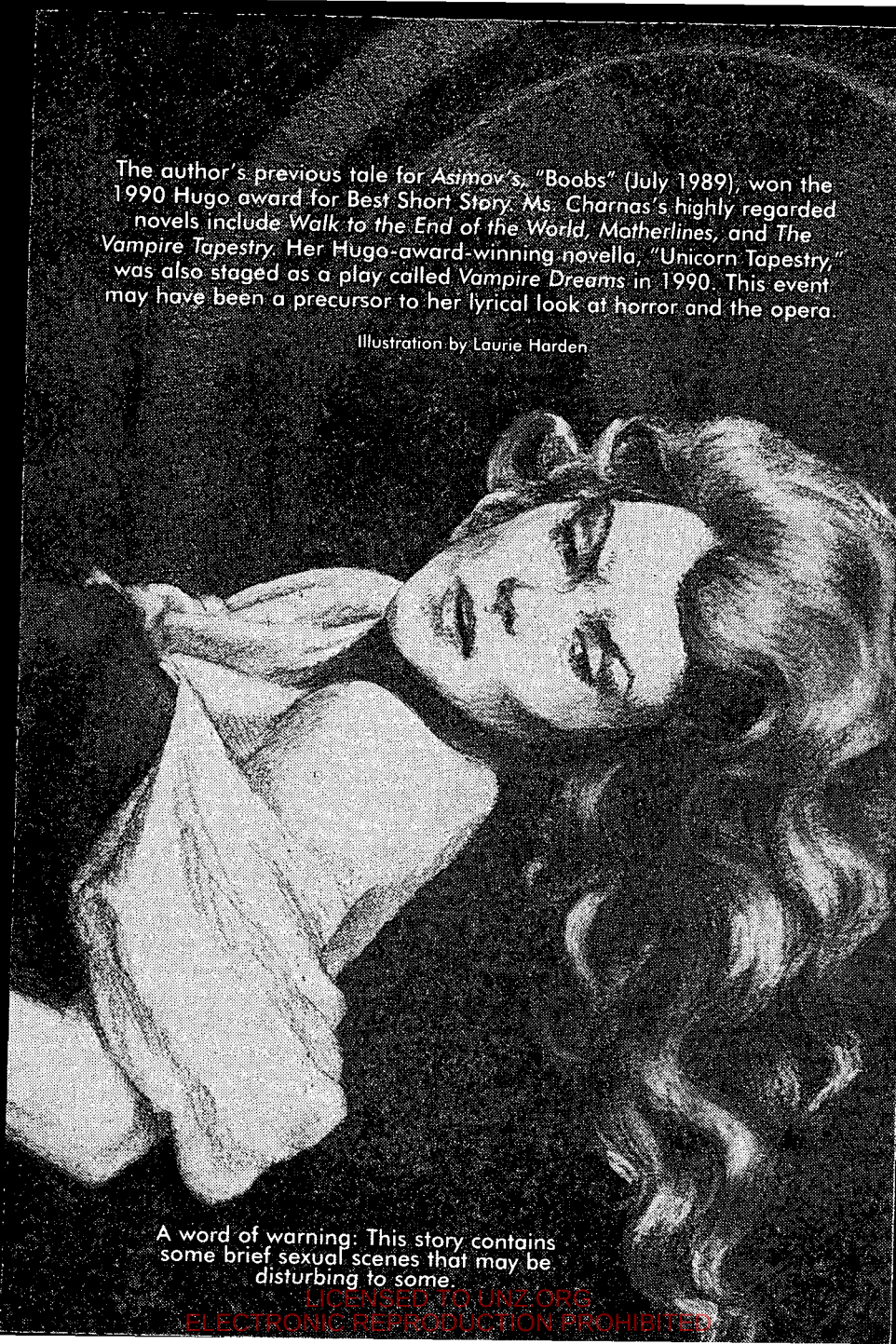
The author's previous tale for *Asimov's*, "Boobs" (July 1989), won the 1990 Hugo award for Best Short Story. Ms. Charnas's highly regarded novels include *Walk to the End of the World*, *Motherlines*, and *The Vampire Tapestry*. Her Hugo-award-winning novella, "Unicorn Tapestry," was also staged as a play called *Vampire Dreams* in 1990. This event may have been a precursor to her lyrical look at horror and the opera.

Illustration by Laurie Harden



A word of warning: This story contains some brief sexual scenes that may be disturbing to some.

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For the first few months, it was very hard to take my meals with him. I kept my gaze schooled to my own plate while he hummed phrases of music and dribbled crumbs down his waistcoat. His mouth, permanently twisted and swollen on one side, held food poorly. Unused to dining in company, he barely noticed.

But to write of such things, I must first set the stage. No more need be known, I think, than anyone might learn from M. Gaston Leroux's novel, *The Phantom of the Opéra,* which that gentleman wrote using certain details he had from me in the winter of 1907 (he was a very persuasive and convivial man, and I spoke far too freely to him); or even from this "moving picture" they have made now from his book.

M. Leroux tells (as best he can in mere words) of a homicidal musical genius who wears a mask to hide the congenital deformity of his face. This monstrous prodigy lives secretly under the Paris Opéra, tyrannizing the staff as the mysterious "Phantom" of the title. He falls in love with a foolish young soprano whose voice he trains and whose career he advances by fair means and foul.

She, thinking him the ghost of her dead father or else an angel of celestial inspiration, is dominated by him until *she* falls in love—with a rich young aristocrat, the Vicomte Raoul de Chagny (the name I shall use here also). The jealous Phantom courts her for himself, with small hope of success however since he sleeps in a coffin and has cold, bony hands that "smell of death."

Our soprano, although pliant and credulous, is not a complete dolt: not surprisingly, she chooses the Vicomte. Enraged, the Phantom kidnaps her—

It was the night of my debut as Marguerite in *Faust.* The Opéra's Prima Donna was indisposed, due perhaps to the terrible accident that had interrupted the previous evening's performance: one of the counterweights of the great chandelier had unaccountably fallen, killing a member of the audience.

Superstitious people (which in a theatre means everyone) whispered that this catastrophe was the doing of the legendary Phantom of the Opéra, whom someone must have displeased. If so, that someone, I knew, was me. Ráoul de Chagny and I had just become secretly engaged. My eccentric and mysterious teacher, whom I was certain was the person known as the Phantom, surely had other plans for me than marriage to a young man of Society.

Nervously, I anticipated confronting my tutor over the matter of the fatal counterweight when next he appeared in my dressing room to give me a singing lesson. I was sure that he would come when the evening's performance was over, as was his habit.

But just as I finished my first number in Act Three, darkness flooded the theatre. Gripped in mid-breath by powerful arms, I dropped, a prisoner, through a trap in the stage.

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I was mortified at being snatched away with my performance barely begun, but knowing that I had not sung well I also felt rather relieved. It is possible, too, that some drug was used to calm me. At any rate I did not scream, struggle, or swoon as my abductor carried me down the cellar passages at an odd, crabwise run that was nonetheless very quick. I knew it was the Phantom, for I had felt the cool smoothness of his mask against my cheek.

No word passed between us until I found myself sitting in a little boat lit by a lantern at the bow. Opposite me sat my mentor, rowing us with practiced ease across the lake that lies in the fifth cellar down, beneath the opera house.

"I am sorry if I frightened you, Christine," he said, his voice echoing hollowly in that watery vault, "but 'Il était un Roi de Thule' was a disgrace, wobbling all over the place, and you ended a full quarter tone flat! You see the result of your distracting flirtation with a shallow boy of dubious quality, titled though he may be. I could not bear to hear what you would have made of the Jewel Song, let alone the duet!"

"My voice was not sufficiently warmed up," I murmured, for indeed Marguerite does not truly begin to sing until the third act. "I might have improved, had I been given time."

"No excuses!" he snapped. "You were not concentrating."

I ought to have challenged him about the lethal counterweight, to which my concentration had in fact fallen victim; but alone with him on that black, subterranean water, I did not dare.

"It was nerves," I said, cravenly. "I never meant to disappoint you, Maestro."

We completed the crossing in silence. In some way that I could not quite see he made the far wall open and admit us to his secret home, which I later learned was hidden between the thick barriers retaining the waters of the lake.

In an ordinary draped and carpeted drawing room, amid a profusion of fresh-cut flowers and myriad gleaming brass candlesticks and lamps, my teacher swore that he loved me and would love me always (despite the inadequate performance I had just attempted in *Faust*). He knelt before me and asked me to live with him in the city above as his wife.

Now I was but a girl, and even down on his knee he was an imposing figure. He always wore formal dress, which flatters any tall man; carried himself with studied grace and dignity; and had (till tonight) behaved impeccably toward me. I imagined the features behind the white, half-face mask he always wore as being sad and noble, concealed for a vow of love or honor, or both.

But he had always seemed much older than I was and, acting as the Opéra's demonic spirit, must live at best a highly irregular life. I had simply never imagined him as a suitor.

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In fact, I had named him from the first my "Angel of Music," not because I thought he was some sort of Heavenly visitor—I was a singer, not a convent-school girl—but to both state and remind him of a standard of conduct that I wished him to uphold in his dealings with me (it had not escaped my notice that he asked no payment for my lessons).

Taken aback by his proposal—and with Raoul's ring hanging hidden on a chain round my neck!—I temporized: "I am flattered, Monsieur. As my father is dead, you must speak with my guardian. But, forgive me, I do not even know your name, or who you are."

The side of his mouth that I could see curved in a smile. "Your guardian is both deaf and senile; it is no use talking to him. As for me, I am the Opéra Ghost, as you surmise. My name is Erik." He paused, breathed deeply, and added, "There, I have told you who I am; now I shall show you!"

With a sudden, extravagant gesture, he swept off his mask and with it all of his thick, dark hair—a wig! I gasped, hardly believing my eyes as he displayed to me the full measure, the positively baroque detail and extraordinary extent, of his phenomenal ugliness.

Large and broad, with bruise-colored patches staining the pallid skin, his head resembled nothing so much as an overripe melon. The fully-revealed face was a nightmare. One eye was sunk in a crooked socket, the nose was half-formed and cavernous, and his cheek resembled a welter of ornamental plaster work, all lumps and hollows and odd tags of skin. His mouth spread and twisted on that same side into a shocking blur of pink flesh, moist and shining. Only his ears were fine, curled tightly to the sides of his freckled crown with its scanty dusting of pale, lank hair. In short, he was a stomach-turning sight.

Abject and defiant at once this monster gazed up at me, clearly apprehending how I recoiled but bearing it in silence while he awaited my answer.

In that blood-freezing instant all my childish fancies and conceits—that with his teaching I would become a great singer, that he and my dear Raoul would gladly join forces to that end—were swept away. Words from the interrupted third act of *Faust* came unbidden to my mind: "Oh, let me, let me, gaze upon your face!" I nearly burst into shrieks of hysterical laughter.

I managed to say, "I think you must be mad, Monsieur, to ask me to accept you!"

"Mad? Certainly not!" He sprang to his feet and glared down at me. "But I am every bit as dangerous as Opéra gossip makes me out to be. Do you remember the stagehand Joseph Buquet, who supposedly hanged himself last Christmas? He died at my hands to stop his chattering about me. You may look to me also in the death caused by the fallen counterweight. I was *very* displeased with your behavior on the roof of my the-

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atre the other evening with the importunate young man whose ring you wear secretly even now; and I made my protest.

"Also that crash, with certain communications from me, is what persuaded Madame Carlotta to step aside tonight and give you your chance to sing Marguerite, of which you made so little. I tell you these things so that you will believe me when I say that your Vicomte's life depends upon your answer, and other lives also."

My heart dropped. "You haven't hurt Raoul! Where is he?"

"Why, he is here, unharmed. Only his fine feathers are somewhat ruffled." He drew a heavy curtain, revealing a window into an adjoining room.

There sat the Vicomte de Chagny, struggling wildly in a chair to which he was lashed by a crisscrossing of thin, bright chains. His clothes were all awry from his wrenchings to get loose, his opera cape was rucked up on the floor at his feet, and his top hat lay on its side in a corner.

Seeing me, Raoul began shouting mightily, his face so reddened that I feared apoplexy. The Phantom touched some switch in the wall and Raoul's voice became audible, bawling out my name: "Christine! Christine, has he touched you, has he insulted you? Charlatan! Scoundrel! Let me go! You ugly devil, I will break you in pieces, I will—"

The curtain fell again. Raoul's yells subsided into frustrated grunting as he renewed his attempts to free himself.

I was horrified. I loved Raoul for his (normally) ebullient and affectionate nature and I dreaded to see him hurt. Of course he was as artistically sensitive as a large veal calf, but we cannot all serve the muses; nor is it a capital offense to be a Philistine.

I sank onto a velvet-seated chair, trying to collect myself. The Opéra Ghost stepped close and said darkly, "His life is in your hands, Christine."

Now I understood his meaning, and I was aghast; yet my heart rose up in exhilaration at the grant of such power. That love of justice found mainly in children burned in my breast. Feeling at fault for the death of the counterweight victim at least, I longed to do right. The Phantom's words seemed to mean that right lay within my grasp—if I had the courage to seize it.

Gripping the arms of my chair, I looked up into his awful face with what I hoped would seem a fearless gaze. "Monsieur Erik, I see in you a man of violence and cruelty. You wish to hurt Raoul because he loves me, and from what you say you plan some wider gesture of destruction as well if I refuse to be your wife."

A vindictive gleam in his eyes confirmed this. I trembled for myself, and for Raoul who groaned and struggled in the next room. Clearly he could not rescue me; I must rescue *him,* and, with him, apparently, others unknown to me but equally at risk.

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In fact, this great goblin in evening dress who called himself Erik, whom I had rashly taken for a friend and mentor, offered me a role grander than any I had yet sung on stage (this was the spring of 1881; *Tosca* had not yet been written), a challenge of breathtaking proportions. Still costumed as honest Marguerite and bursting with her unsung music, I determined to meet the test. I was very young.

"Here is my answer," I said. "If you let Raoul go and swear, moreover, to commit no further violence so long as you live, I will stay with you—for five years."

One does not survive in the arts without learning to bargain.

"Five years!" exclaimed the Ghost. "Why, I have lived with *her* for ten, and there have been no complaints!" He indicated with a wave the major oddity of his décor, a fashion mannequin seated at the piano wearing my costume as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

"Monsieur Erik," I replied, "I mean what I say: I offer my talent, such as it is, for you to shape and train as you choose, as well as my acceptance of your love—" my throat nearly closed on these words, and I was afraid I might vomit "—on the terms I have stated, for five years."

I chose the number out of the air; five years was the length of time I had been at the Paris Opéra.

How well prepared I was for that moment I understood only upon later reflection. A French music professor had seen my father and me performing in our native Sweden, and, thinking my father a rustic genius on the violin, had brought us both to France. But my father—more at ease, perhaps, as an exhibitor of my talents than as someone else's prize exhibit—had gone into a steep decline.

Extremity makes a monster of any dying man to those who must answer his incessant, heart-wringing, and ultimately vain demands for help and comfort. I did not begrudge the duty I had owed, and paid; but I had learned in those long months the price of yielding to another person unbounded power over my days and nights. In life as in art, limitation is all.

The Phantom frowned, plainly perplexed by a response he had not foreseen. I added hurriedly, "And we must live here below, not out in the everyday world. The strain of pretending to be just like other people would be more than I could bear. That is my offer. Will you take it?"

He showed wolfish teeth. "Remember where you are. I can take what I want and keep what I like, for as long as I wish."

"But, my dear Angel," I quavered, "you may not like to have me with you even as long as five years. You are accustomed to your own ways, untrammeled by considerations of the wants of a living companion." I glanced aside at the undemanding mannequin to make my meaning clear. "And we will not be honing my talents for public performance, but only for our own satisfaction, which may lessen the pleasure of my constant company."

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"What do you mean?" he demanded. "I have promised from the first to make a famous diva of you!"

"Maestro," I said, "please understand: you have allowed your passions to drive you too far. I doubt that the Opéra managers would accept your direction of my career now on any terms. You have just said that you killed a stagehand and loosed the counterweight on the head of a helpless old woman. In the world above, you are not a great music-master but a callous murderer."

"In the world above—" he repeated intently. "But not here below? Then you forgive me?"

"I do not presume to forgive crimes committed against others," said I, with the lofty severity of youth. "But neither can anything you or I might do bring back your victims alive and well, so what use is blame and condemnation? You have treated me—for the most part—with consideration and respect, and I mean to respond in kind. But I can accept no more advancement of my career by your efforts. I must reject a success made for me by the heartless criminality of the Opéra Ghost."

He wrung his hands, a poignant gesture when coupled with his ghastly head and threatening demeanor. "But what have I to offer you, except my knowledge of music and my influence here at the Opéra?"

"That we must discover," I replied more gently, for his question had touched me. As the answer was "nothing," I dared to hope that I might induce him to acknowledge the futility of his plans and release Raoul and me. "But making a career for me is out of the question now. Please put that possibility from your mind."

Drawing a square of cambric from his pocket and patting his lips dry with it, he stared gloomily at the floor. No apology, no instant grant of liberty was forthcoming. I saw that he would not reconsider, and it was too late for me to do so.

"So," I finished dejectedly, "my choice is to join you in exile and obscurity, not fame and glory. All crimes have their costs, it seems, with or without forgiveness."

"Then you won't sing in my opera, when it is staged?" he said, sounding near to tears himself. "But I composed it for you!"

He had previously told me that he had been working on this opus for twenty years and that it was too advanced for me in any case; but I judged his emotion honest enough.

"And I will sing it for you if you wish," I said quickly, "here in your home. Won't that suffice? Can it be, my angel and teacher, that you do not want *me* at all, just my voice for your opera? Is it only my talent, put to use for your own recognition, that you love? I am sorry, but you must give that up. Guiltless as I am of your crimes, if I let you raise me up with hands tainted by murder I shall be as bloodstained as you are yourself."

He blinked at me in pained bafflement. "How is it, Christine, that I

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love you to the depths of my soul, but I do not understand you at all? You are scarcely more than a child, yet you speak like a jurist. What do you want of me? What must I do?"

Taking a deep breath of the warm, flower-scented air I repeated my terms: "You must release the Vicomte, unharmed. You must swear to do no more violence to him or to anyone. And five years from now, you must let me go, too."

He flung away from me and began to pace the carpeted floor, raising puffs of dust with every step (for he had no servants, and, like many artistic people, he was an indifferent housekeeper). Freed from his oppressive hovering, I arose from my chair and surreptitiously breathed in the calming way that he had taught me.

"I have said that I love you," he said sulkily over his shoulder, "and I mean love that lasts and informs a lifetime—not the trifling fancy of an Opéra dandy whose true loves are the gaming tables and the race track!"

This jeer, spoken with deliberate loudness, provoked renewed sounds of struggle in the next room, which I resolutely ignored.

"I am young yet, Maestro," I said meekly. "Five years is a very long time to me." He sighed, crossed his arms on his breast, and bowed his dreadful head. "But I can school myself to spend that time with you so long as I know there is an end to it; and if you will promise to sing for me, often, in your splendid voice that I have never heard equaled."

"With songs or without them, I can keep you here forever if I choose," he muttered.

"As a prisoner filled with hatred for you, yes," I dared to reply, for I sensed that he was losing heart. "But prisoners are the chains of their jailers, and they often pine and die. If I were to perish here, my poor dead body would stink and rot like any other. You would be worse off than you are now with your poupette, there, that you have dressed in my costume. I offer more than that, dear Angel; for five years, no less and no more."

I think that no one had argued with Erik, face to face, for a very long time. He certainly had not expected reasoned opposition from me. I was sure that he was on the verge of giving way.

Raoul chose this moment to issue a challenge at the top of his lungs from next door: "Fight me like a man, if you *are* a man, you filthy freak! Choose your weapons and fight for her!"

The Phantom's head came sharply up and he rounded on me so fiercely that I could not keep from flinching.

"Liar!" he shouted. "It's a trick! You maneuver to save your little Vicomte, that is all! Do you think he would wait for you? Do you think he would *want* you, after I have had you by me for even your paltry five years? You would be sadly disappointed, Ma'amselle. Or do you mean to coax and befool me, and then escape in a month or two when my back is turned and run to your Raoul? I will kill him first. You lying vixen, I will kill you both!"

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"I am not a liar!" I cried, my eyes brimming over at last.

"Prove it!" he screamed, in a very ecstasy of grief and rage. "Liar! Little liar! Prove it!"

I stepped forward, caught him round the neck, and kissed him. I shut my eyes, I could not help that, but I pressed my mouth full on his bloated, glistening lips and leant my breast on his. My trembling hands fitted themselves to the back of his nearly naked head, holding his face tight to mine; and he was not cold and toad-like to the touch as I had anticipated, but vigorous and warm.

How can I describe that kiss? It was like putting my mouth to an open wound, as intimate an act as if I had somehow slipped my hand in among his entrails.

After a blind and breathless moment, I stepped away again, much shaken. He had not moved but had gone utterly rigid from head to foot in my embrace. We looked one another in the eyes in shocked silence.

"So be it," he said at last in a hoarse voice. "The boy goes free, and I will submit my hatreds to your authority." His eyes narrowed. "But you must marry me, Christine. I will have no shadow cast upon your name or character on my account; and there must be no misunderstanding between us as to the duties owed whilst you live with me."

"I accept," I whispered, though I quailed inwardly at the mention of those "duties."

He left me. There came some muffled, unsettling sounds from the next room, during which I had time to wonder wretchedly how my Raoul had fallen into the hands of this monster.

But according to Opéra gossip the Phantom was supremely clever, while I had reluctantly noticed in Raoul flashes (if that is the word) of the obdurate, uncomprehending stupidity of the privileged. I was familiar with this quality from my childhood days of entertaining, with my father, the wealthy farmers and burghers who hired us to make music for them. Apparently the addition of noble blood only exacerbated the condition.

In a few moments, Erik reappeared holding his rival's limp body in his arms like that of a sleeping child. Raoul had recently begun growing a beard, and he looked very downy and dear. The sight of him all but undid me.

"He is not hurt," said the Phantom gruffly. "Bid him goodbye, Christine. You shall not see him again in my domain."

I longed to press a parting kiss to Raoul's flushed and slack-jawed face, for he looked like Heaven itself to me. But my kisses were pledged now, every one. I must wait, in an agony of mingled terror and queasy anticipation, for their claimed redemption—not by Raoul, but by the Opéra Ghost.

I slipped off the chain with Raoul's ring on it, wound it round his hand, and stood back helplessly as Erik bore him away.

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Left alone, I rushed about the underground house like a bird trapped in a mineshaft. Fear drove me this way and that and would not let me rest. I was locked in, for Erik quite correctly mistrusted me; had I found a way out, I would have taken it.

The rooms of his house, modest and snug, were warm, with lamps and candles burning everywhere. The furniture, apart from a pair of pretty Empire chairs in the drawing room, consisted of heavy, dark, provincial pieces. A few murky landscape paintings hung on the walls. There were shelves of books and of ornamental oddments—a little glass shoe full of centime pieces, some carved jade scent bottles, a display of delicate porcelain flowers—which I dared not touch lest I doom myself forever, like Persephone eating the pomegranate seeds in Hades.

In my distraction, I intruded into my captor's bedroom, which was hung with tapestries of hunting scenes and pale green bed-curtains dappled in gold, like a vision from the life of the young Siegfried. The sylvan effect was diminished by the presence of a number of gilded, elaborate clocks showing not only the hour but whether it was day or night. I did not own a clock, being unable to afford one; clearly I was not in the home of a poor man.

There was no mirror in which to see my frightened face (nor even a windowpane, for behind the drapes lay blank walls). The only sound was the ticking of the clocks.

At last, I sank onto a divan in the drawing room and gave way to sobs of misery and bitter self-reproach. I could scarcely believe myself caught in such a desperate coil. Yet here I was, a foreigner, a poor orphan with no family but my fellow-workers at the Opéra. I had made friends among the ballet rats, but no one listens to an alarm raised by fifteen-year old girls. The professor, my guardian, was only intermittently aware of my existence these days. Who would miss me, who would search?

Raoul was my one hope. I had met him years before, during a summer I had spent with my father at Chagny. Grown to be a handsome, lively man of fashion, the young Vicomte had turned up lately in Paris as the proud new owner of a box at the Opéra. I had been flattered that he even remembered me.

His proposal of marriage was typical of his impetuous and optimistic nature. In my more realistic moments I had not really believed that his family would ever permit such a joining. Now I had not even his ring to remember him by.

But he would save me, surely! I told myself that Raoul loved me, that he would lead an attack on the underground house and never give up until he had me back again.

How he might overcome the obstacle of my having spent—however long it was to be—unchaperoned in the home of another man, I could not imagine. Raoul's people were not Bohemians. His brother the Comte had

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already expressed displeasure over the warm relations between Raoul and me, and that was without a kidnapping.

Still, my cheerful and enthusiastic Vicomte would not allow me to languish in captivity (I tried to blot out the image of him, red-faced, roaring, and chained to a chair). I had only to stand fast and keep my head and he would rescue me.

Erik, returning at long last, showed me to a very pretty little bedroom with my meager selection of clothing already hanging in the wardrobe and my toiletries laid out on the table.

He behaved from this point as a gracious host, always polite, faultlessly turned out, and considerately masked. This surface normality was all that enabled me to keep my own composure. At night I slept undisturbed (when I did sleep), although there was no lock on my door. Daytimes, the Phantom spent absorbed in composition, humming pitches and runs under his breath, pausing to play a phrase on the piano or to stab his pen into a brass inkwell in the shape of a spaniel's head.

I continued my own work as best I could. Each morning he listened to me vocalize, but he made no comment. When I ventured to ask him for a lesson, trying to restore our relationship to some semblance of its old footing, he said, "No, Christine. You must see how you get along without the aid of your Angel of Music."

So I saw that my initial rejection still rankled, and that he was inclined to hold a grudge.

The third morning after *Faust,* I burst into tears over breakfast: "You said you would free Raoul! He would come back for me if he were alive! You monster, you have killed him!"

Erik tapped his fingers impatiently upon the smooth white cheek of his mask. "Why should I do such a thing? He is an absurd young popinjay with no understanding of music, but I do not hate him; after all, you are here with me, not run off with him."

I flung down my napkin, knocking over my water glass. "You murdered poor Joseph Buquet for gossiping about you. I daresay you did not *hate* him, but you killed him all the same!"

Erik moved his knee to avoid the dripping water. "Oh, Buquet! One deals differently with aristocrats. I assure you, the boy is alive and well. His brother has taken him home to Chagny. Now eat your omelette, Christine. Cold eggs are bad for the throat."

That evening he brought a ledger from the Opéra offices and set before me a page showing that the Vicomte de Chagny had given up his box two days after the night of *Faust.* Raoul had signed personally for his refund of the remainder of the season's fee. There was no doubt; I recognized his writing.

So in his own way Erik *had* chosen his weapons, had fought for me—and won. At least no blood had been shed. I ceased accusing him and resigned myself to making the best of my situation.

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I spent two weeks as his guest, solicitously and formally attended by him in my daily wants. He even took me on a tour of the lake in the little boat, and showed me the subterranean passage from the Opéra cellars to the Rue Scribe through which he obtained provisions from the outside world.

Then, during the wedding procession in a performance of *Lohengrin,* the Opéra Ghost and I exchanged vows beneath the stage. He placed upon my finger a ring that had been his mother's, or so he supposed since he had found it in a bureau of hers (most of his furniture he had inherited from his mother, he told me; and that was all the mention he ever made of her).

He solemnly wrote out and presented to me a very handsome and official-looking civil certificate,and he said that having had his first kiss already he would not trouble me for another yet, since he was so ugly and must be gotten used to.

Thus began my marriage to the Phantom of the Opéra.

In M. Leroux's story the Phantom's heart is melted by the compassion of the young singer. He releases the lovers and dies soon after, presumably of a morbid enlargement of the organ of renunciation. The soprano and her Vicomte take a train northward and are never heard of again.

But that is not what happened.

When he said "first kiss," Erik may have spoken literally. Like any man in funds he could buy sexual favors, and had certainly done so in the past. But with what wincing, perfunctory haste those services must have been rendered! And he was proud and in his own way gallant, or at any rate he wished to be both proud and gallant. I thought then and think still that although more than twice my age at least, he was very inexperienced with women.

For my part, I was virginal but not completely naïve. Traveling with my father I had observed much of life in its cruder aspects, in particular that ubiquitous army of worn-out, perpetually gravid country girls through whose lives we had briefly passed. My own mother, whom I scarcely recalled, had died bearing a stillborn son when I was two years old.

I regarded sexual matters as I did the stinks and wallowings of the pigsty. Before Raoul's reappearance, I had determined to remain celibate, reserving all my energies for my art. Even my dalliance with him had been chaste, barring a kiss or two. In any case, I had no idea what to expect from a monster.

No expectation could have prepared me for what followed.

For two nights Erik came and sat silently in a chair by my bed. I sensed him listening in the dark to my breathing and to the small rustlings I made as I shifted and turned, unable to sleep. I felt observed

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by some nocturnal beast of prey that might claw me to pieces at any moment.

On the third night he brought a candle. I saw that he was masked and wore a long red silken robe. His feet, which like his hands were strong and well-shaped, gleamed palely on the dark Turkish carpet.

He set the candle on the little table by my bed and said in a hushed tone, "Christine, you are my wife. Take off your gown."

In those days decent women did not show their nakedness to anyone, not even their own husbands. But I had stepped beyond the pale; no convention or nicety protected me in Grendel's lair.

He turned away, and when I had done as he said and lain down again in a trembling sweat of fear he leaned over me and folded back the sheet, exposing the length of my body to the warm air of the room. Then he sat in his chair and looked at me. I stared at the ceiling, tears of shame and terror running from the corners of my eyes into my hair, until I fell into an exhausted sleep.

Next morning, I lay a long time in bed wondering how much more I could bear of his stifled desire. I thought he meant to be considerate, gentling me to his presence as a rider gentles an unbroken horse, little by little.

Instead, he was crushing me slowly to death.

The following night he came again and set the candle down. "Christine, take off your gown."

I answered, "Erik, you are my husband. Take off your mask."

A moment passed during which I dared not breathe. Then he snatched off the mask, in his agitation dropping it on the floor. He managed not to grab after it but stood immobile under my scrutiny, his face turned away only a little.

When I could gaze on that grotesque visage without my gorge rising, I knew I was as ready as I could ever be. I shrugged out of my nightdress, and taking his hand I drew him toward me. He reached quickly to pinch out the candle.

"No," I said, "let it burn," and I turned down the sheet.

After that, he always came to my bed unmasked. He would lie so that I looked straight into his terrible face while his hands touched me, rousing and warming the places where his mouth would soon follow, that hideous mouth that devoured without destruction all the juices, heats, and swellings of passion.

He proved a barely banked fire, scorched and scorching with a lifetime of need. And I—I went up like summer grass, I flamed like pitch, clasped to his straining breast. As beginners, everything that we did was unbearably disgusting to us both, and so frantically exciting that we could not stop nor hold back anything. My God, how we burned!

Knowing himself to be only a poor, rough sketch of a man, he had few

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expectations and never thought to blame me for his own shortcomings (or, for that matter, for mine). He was at first too swift for my satisfaction, but he set himself to master the gratifications of lust as he might a demanding musical score. Some very rare books appeared on his shelves.

He studied languor, lightness of touch, and the uses of raw energy. I learned to lure him from his work, to meet his advances with revulsion and open arms at once, and to invite to my shrinking cheek his crooked kisses that came all intermixed with moans and whisperings and that seemed to liquefy my heart.

I learned to twine my legs round his, guiding him home to that secret part of myself, the odorous, the blood-seeping, the unsightly, puckered mouth of my sex. To whom else could I have exposed that humid breach in my body's defenses, all sleek with avidity? With what other person could I have shared my sweat, my spit, my rising deliriums of need and release filled with animal cries and groans?

Initially I suffered the utmost, soul-wringing terror and shame. But then came an intoxication that I can only compare to the trance of song, and this was the lyric of that song: my monster adored the monstrous in me.

Oh, he enjoyed my pretty face, my good figure, and my long, thick hair, all the simple, human handsomeness denied him in his own right. But what he craved was the gorgon under my skirts. His deepest pleasure depended on the glaring difference between my comely outward looks and the seeming deformity of my hidden female part. He loved to love me with his twisted mouth, monster to monster, gross and shapeless flesh to its like, slippery heat to slippery heat, and cry to convulsion.

We awoke new voices in one another. To the slow coiling of our entangled limbs we crooned like doves. His climax wrung from him half-strangled, exultant cries like those of a soul tearing free from its earthly roots. In turn, I sang for him the throaty songs of a body drowning rapturously in its own depths.

I commanded, praised, begged, and reviled him, calling him my loathsome demon, my leprous ape, my ruined, rutting angel, never stooping to the pretense that he was other than awful to look at. I felt that if I treated his appearance as normal, he would be grateful; but in time he would come to hate and despise me for accepting what he hated and despised in himself. A man who feels this way beats the woman who shares his life, whether he is a handsome man or an ugly one.

Erik did strike me once.

It was quite early in our life together. We were studying Antonia's trio with her mother and Dr. Miracle from *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which Erik had heard at its Opéra Comique premiere some three months earlier. From memory, he played Dr. Miracle's music on the piano; and he sang the dead mother's part, transposed downward, with an otherworldly tenderness and nobility that greatly moved and distracted me.

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I struggled vainly with Antonia's music (which he had written out for me), until Erik's largely unsolicited advice spurred me to observe rather tartly that he was very arrogant in his opinions, for an ugly man who lived in a cellar singing songs and writing music that no one would ever hear.

He leaped to his feet and sharp as a whip he slapped me. I stood my ground, my cheek hot and stinging, and said, "Erik, stop! By the terms of our bargain, you are not to be that sort of monster."

"Am I not?" he snapped, glaring hatefully at me. "You go tripping out on stage in your finery and you open your mouth and everyone throws flowers and shouts the house down. I have twice the voice of any singer in Paris, but as you so kindly remind me, no audience will ever hear me and beg me for an encore! If you write a little song that is not too terrible, they will say what a clever creature you are to be able to sing songs and make them too. But they will never be brought to tears by my music. So what sort of monster will *you* allow *me* to be, Christine?"

"I am sorry for what I said," I replied. I could not help but see how his lips gleamed with the saliva sprayed out during this tirade; repelled, I thrust my handkerchief toward him.

He snatched it from me and blotted his mouth, snarling, "Oh, spare me your so-called apologies! Why should you care for the feelings of a miserable freak?"

"I have said I am sorry for my words," I said, more angrily than I had meant to. "I have not heard you say that you are you sorry for your action. Do you understand that the next time you strike me, whatever the provocation, I will leave you and I will never, ever come back? You will have to kill me to stop me; and then I will be revenged in the pain it will cost you if I die in your house, at your hands, that are beautiful and strong and that wish only to love me."

He stared down at the handkerchief clenched in his fingers, and I knew by the droop of his shoulders that the perilous moment was past. Still I forged recklessly onward, for my heart was in a turmoil of confused and painful emotion. "If you must hit something go and beat the poupette, which you have dressed in my old costume, until your rage is spent. But never raise your hand to me again!"

In low tones he began, "Christine, I—"

"It is all your fault!" I burst out. "You should not have sung her music, the dead mother's music!"

"Ah," he said. "The dead mother's music."

I stiffened, dreading that I had exposed a weakness to him that he would surely exploit. But he only raised his head and sang once more, unaccompanied and more gloriously than before, that same lofty music of the ghostly mother urging her daughter to sing.

"Now," he said afterward, "if you are moved to say cutting things to me, say them. I will endure it quietly."

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My eyes stung, for the music had again affected me deeply. So had the realization that he of all men knew why it did so, for surely his own mother had been dead to him from the day she first saw his terrible face. In his way, he was offering a very handsome apology indeed.

I shook my head, not trusting my voice.

He nodded gravely. "Very good, your restraint is commendable. After all, Christine, it is our task to master the music, not to let the music master us. Now, let us begin again."

We began again.

Other crises arose, of course. His habitual cruelty and malice inclined him toward outrageous gestures of annoyance, as when I found him preparing to burn alive a chorus girl's little poodle that he had lured away for the purpose. The animal's backstage yapping had disturbed an otherwise unusually good *Abduction from the Seraglio.*

I seized the matches from his unresisting hands. With the shawl from the costumed mannequin I blotted as much lamp oil as I could from the dog's coat. Then I carried the terrified creature to the appropriate dressing area and left it there, its muzzle still tied shut with Erik's handkerchief (the dog was not seen, or heard, at the Opéra again).

Returning, I found Erik in an agony of penitence, offering to drink lamp oil himself or to wear a tightly tied gag for as long as I chose, to redeem his transgression. He showed no remorse for the agonies he had meant to inflict on the dog and its owner, but he was deeply agitated at having nearly failed his promise again, and in such a spectacular fashion.

I approved the gag as a fitting punishment. That night the Opéra Ghost cried like a cat into the layered thicknesses of cloth crushing his lips, while on my knees I ignited our own sweet-burning immolation.

Don't misunderstand: in music he was my master and would be my master still if he stood here now. His talent and learning were broad, discriminating, and seemingly inexhaustible. It was he who led me to the study that became my absorbing delight, of the sorts of chromatic and key shifts that irresistibly evoke certain powerful emotions in the hearer.

But his violence was mine to rule, so long as I had the strength and the wit to command it, by the submission I had won from him with that first kiss.

Between us we sustained a steep pitch of passion despite the muting effects of familiarity, I think because of the time limit I had set. Never repeat even the prettiest melody more than thrice at a go, my father used to say. Knowing it must end enhances its beauty and prevents boredom in its hearers.

Domestic chores gave Erik's life a sense of normality; he yielded them

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only reluctantly to me. Nor did I wish to become his drudge. However, his standards of housekeeping and cooking (two areas in which he had no talents whatsoever) were far below mine; and I did not expect him to wait on me as he had when I was his guest. I had chosen a life (albeit a truncated one), not an escapade.

We wrangled cautiously over household duties and came to a rough arrangement, with many exceptions and re-negotiations as circumstances required. When his compositional impulse flagged, if he could not relieve his frustration by prowling the opera house I did not hesitate to assign him extra chores. More than once I sent him out of the house with a dusty carpet, a beater, and instructions to vigorously apply the latter to the former.

Having had none of the normal social experience that matures ordinary people, he could behave very childishly. This lent him an air of perennial youthfulness at once attractive and extremely trying. His emotions, when tapped, poured from him like lava, and he had great difficulty mastering the molten flow once it began. Physical work, like the demands of operatic singing, helped to bleed off at least some of his ungovernable energy.

In our leisure time I asked about his past. I had thought him an aristocrat, but his arrogance was that of talent, not of blood. He was the son of a master mason in Rouen. When he was still a child his parents had either given or sold him (he did not know which) to a traveling fair.

As a young man, he had ranged far and wide, living by his wits and his abilities as an artificer of ingenious structures and devices. He regaled me with tales of his exotic travels before he had settled in Paris, where, commanding some Turkish laborers (whose language he spoke) at work on Garnier's great opera house, he had secretly constructed his home in its bowels. He had always worn a kerchief over his nose and mouth "for the dust," but his workmen had been less interested in his face than in the extra wages he paid for their clandestine labor.

Given my knowledge of his character I guessed that he omitted much repellent detail from these lively narratives. Though troubled, I never pressed him, reasoning that such matters lay between him, the souls of those he had harmed, and God.

In my turn I read aloud to him from the biographies and travel books that he favored, or repeated anecdotes of café life and gossip (no matter how stale) about composers and performers whose names he knew. I taught him some Swedish, a language of interest to him because of its strong tonal element, and he enjoyed hearing songs and legends of the northern lands, which he had never visited. As a child, I had absorbed many tales from folk tradition and from books, which now stood me in good stead. People raised in countries with long winters treasure stories and tell them well.

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Outside of music, Erik was not so widely read as I had supposed. Many of his books had only a few of their pages cut. He hungered for books but was impatient with their contents once he had them. In the first place, he was sure that he knew more about everything than anyone else did because he was a prodigy and well-traveled in the world.

And then, he spent far more time roaming "his" opera house and working on the various small, mechanical contrivances he was always inventing and refining than he did reading. Indeed, he was in a continual ferment of activity of one kind or another, from the orbit of which I sometimes had to withdraw simply to rest myself.

I came to regard him as a flood of notes and markings falling in a tempestuous jumble upon the blank page of his life. He had instinctively tried to create order in himself through composing, with limited success: a well-orchestrated life is not typified by ferocious obsessions and quixotic crimes. I believe he submitted to my scoring, as it were, in order to experience his own melody, in place of a ceaseless chaos of all but random noise.

Weeks and months passed, bringing our scheduled parting closer by increments almost too small to notice, and never spoken of. Even inadvertent allusions to my future departure sent Erik storming off to work on the darkest of his music, with its plunging, wheeling figures of mockery and despair.

It hurt me, that music. I think it hurt him. I never tried to sing any of it, nor, despite his previously stated intentions, did he ask me to.

In his opera, *Don Juan Triumphant,* Don Juan seduces an Archangel who helps him to master the Devil in Hell. From this position of power, the Don decrees a regime of true justice on Earth that wins over Heaven also to his side; whereupon God, dethroned, pulls down Creation in a mighty cataclysm in which all are swallowed up. A moral tale, then (as operas tend to be), the music and lyrics of which combined wild extremes of fury, yearning, and savage satire.

Of its quality, I will say this: Erik's music was magnificent but too radical to have been accepted, let alone admired, in its time (as he often said himself). Some days, his raw, raging chords drove me out to walk beside the lake in blessed quiet. Some days I sat weak with weeping for the extraordinary beauty and poignance of what I heard. His music offered nothing familiar, comforting, or merely pretty. Parisian audiences would not have stood it.

Nonetheless, he spent hours planning the premiere of his opera, which he projected for the turn of the century. All the great men of the world would be invited, and all would come (or else). The experience would change their lives. The course of history itself would be altered for the better by Erik's music.

My lessons resumed soon after the night of *Lohengrin*. Erik taught me

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the rudiments of composition, which I spent many hours refining in practice. In particular, he had me sing and play my own alternate versions of musical figures from the works of the masters, by comparison with which I learned the measure of true genius (as well as the best directions of my own modest talents). This, he said, was how he had taught himself.

He was critical of men like Bizet, Wagner, Verdi, and Gounod, and fiercely jealous of their fame. Yet he worked long and hard with me on their music, for he did not deny greatness when he heard it. At leisure, he would play Bach on the piano with a stiff but sure touch; and then his eyes often glittered with tears—of gratitude, I think, for the sublime *order* of that music.

It was a terror and a joy to sing for him. I have never known anyone to whom music was so all-absorbing, so demanding, and so painfully essential.

His vocal instruction was founded on carefully designed drill and on breathing techniques that he had learned in the Orient. Freed from constriction, my voice began to show its natural qualities. I saw that I might move from the bright but relatively empty soubrette repertoire to the lower-lying, richer, lyric roles.

"Your voice will darken as it ages," he said, "but you have the vocal capacity for some of the great lyric roles already, I can hear it. And the emotional capacity, too; you are not the child you were, Christine. Your Marguerite is much improved, and you will soon be ready to attempt Violetta."

Under his tutelage my range expanded downward with minimal loss of agility above, and I gained a certain sumptuosity of tone overall. I would hear myself produce a beautifully floated pianissimo and wonder how on earth I had done it.

Of course, the next day it was unattainable—these achievements torment singers by their evanescence. Erik would not permit me to overwork my voice, striving to retake such heights. "Wait," he said. "Rest. It will come." About such things he was almost always right.

I bitterly missed performing in public with my improved skills. But in my heart I knew this sacrifice to be well-suited to my collusion (however innocent) in Erik's most recent crimes.

There was much that I was incapable of learning from him, for he was gifted with a degree of musicality that I simply did not possess. I came to prefer hearing him sing for me (as he did often, true to his promise) to producing the finest singing of which I myself was capable. One's most glorious tones are inevitably distorted out of true inside one's own head.

Also, I came to realize that I had a very good voice but not a great one. He said otherwise; but he was in love. And I think he was well content—knowingly or unknowingly—to train up a good voice that was still not quite as fine as his own.

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For he sang like a god, with a beauty that cannot be imagined by those who never heard him. He had a tenor voice of remarkable power, flexibility, and range, which because of his superb musicianship was never merely, monotonously, perfect. I was reminded of descriptions I had read of the singing of the great castrati of the previous century.

Without apparent effort, Erik produced long, flowing lines of thrilling richness, like molten gold pouring improbably from the mouth of a stony basilisk. Joyous, meditative, amorous, wild or sad, his singing enraptured me; I could not hear enough of it. As we worked together, he increased the bolder, rougher, more dramatic capabilities of his own voice, producing song expressive enough to pierce a heart of steel.

Or to calm a heart in panic. I had been prey to night-terrors from an early age; when I cried out in my sleep Erik would come with a candle to remind me that I lived with a veritable walking nightmare of flesh, so how could I allow mere dreams to trouble me? Then he would sit by my bed and sing. Often he chose "Cielo e Mar," from *Gioconda*, which he rendered with a soothing sweetness that soon sent me drifting off again.

How his moisture-spraying travesty of a mouth could produce song of such precision, versatility, and lustre I never understood. He ought not even to have sung tenor; tall men are almost always baritones. But he was anomalous in so many respects that I gave up trying to account for him. Every time I heard him sing I reminded myself that from the first I had named him an angel.

Sometimes he talked of traveling together like gypsies, singing for our supper as each of us had in youth. He was fascinated by the resemblances in our respective upbringings, I as a child-performer accompanying my peripatetic father, he as a circus freak astonishing audiences with feats of legerdemain and song, and of course with his shocking appearance.

But I saw the differences, which were stark.

My father was a country fiddler with no education, a hard drinker and a fanatical gambler. He had not hesitated to exploit my pretty face and voice at the fairs, fine homes, and festivals where we performed. He played, I sang. Ours was not a sentimental relationship. Yet while he lived I never went hungry or found myself thrown naked upon the spiny mercies of the world.

Erik, expelled from his home like a leper, had ranged the earth in the isolation to which his repulsive face condemned him. Leaving the circus, he had worked for despots who half the time would have murdered him instead of paying him had he not outwitted them, like some branded Odysseus. He had taken the name "Erik," he said, because he liked its bold, Viking sound.

Occasionally, wondering how I had come to this strange new life, I fantasized that he and I were magical siblings, the ugly one and the pretty

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one, the "bad" one and the "good" one, joined at the soul by music. Parted early through mischance, we were now drawn close again—voluptuously, unlawfully close—by that indissoluble bond.

I did not share such fancies with Erik. He was stubbornly conventional about some things, family among them. But I was mated to a monster: what better occasion for my most perverse imaginings?

Erik's own imaginings were far more dangerous.

One day when I called him to our noon meal, he sprang up from his writing desk and made me come sit down in his place. Pressing a pen into my hand and closing my fingers hard upon it, he tried to force me to shape letters on the blank page before me.

"Write," he said tightly in my ear. "Surely there is some message you wish to send? Write to Raoul, at Chagny. You let him kiss you that night on the roof. Don't you think about those expert kisses of his? Of course you do—you think of them when my clumsy mouth kisses you. Write and tell him, make him glad!"

The wildness of his accusations, the painful grip of his fingers on mine, and the palpable heat of jealous rage pouring off him all combined to scare me half out of my wits.

"Let me go!" I cried. I managed to lift my hand a little and fling the pen away. My arm knocked down the inkwell, which fortunately was nearly empty and which did not break.

Erik stooped to retrieve it, muttering furiously, "Now see what you have done!"

"See what *you* have done," I answered. "You have raised your hand."

"Coward!" he spat. "I barely touched you!"

"Your words are blows, just as you intend them to be," I said. "I have told you what I will do if you abuse me."

"Go or stay, it is all the same!" he shouted. "Your promise is a sham! Do you think me such a fool? You lie in my arms and dream of your pretty Vicomte, and in your heart you mock me!"

His face was dark with hatred—hatred of *me*, for my power to cause him pain. It meant nothing that I intended him no ill and in truth had no such power, save what he himself assigned to me. I saw that I was lost, for his fury was fed not by any actions of mine but by his own inner demons, which only he could master.

Terror closed my throat. Injustice drove me to speak.

"Now you have clenched your fist," I choked out. "Very well. Hit hard, Erik, punish the fraud you wrongly say I am. But strike to kill, for living or dead I shall be lost to you for good."

In his rage he may not have heard my words; but he heard their music (for it welled from the same dark sources as his own) and he could not help but stop and listen.

"*Why do you prevent me?*" He struck his fist hard upon his thigh. "It is

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the pretext you long for, the blow that will free you! Why do you thwart me? Why?"

Even as he spoke I saw the obvious answer dawn upon him (as it dawned upon me at the same moment): that I did not wish to be freed, but to live out my commitment to the end.

The frenzied glare died from his face, leaving him pale and haggard. "Oh, Christine," he said. "Sometimes I imagine horrible things, and now I have nearly made them come true."

"Do you think you have not?" I said, savage in my turn. "I warned you!"

I did not truly mean to leave him, now that his fury was in retreat. But I did mean to hurt him, and I succeeded. He stared at me with a stricken look.

Then he cast himself down before me, stretched prone upon the floor in a posture of such limitless submission that in the West it is only ever displayed before God. At one stroke he transformed himself from a cultured, willful man of my own world (albeit outcast in it) into a faceless beggar groveling before some barbarian overlord or the lawless caprice of Fate.

It was a vertiginous moment, appalling, piteous, and thrilling. I longed to stoop at once, all merciful forgiveness, and lift him up again; or else to grind my heel into the nape of his neck until he writhed, gasping, at my feet. Paralyzed, I stared down at him, scarcely breathing.

In a hollow voice he begged my pardon. I stammered that I would pardon him when I could, for he had wronged me very deeply. He accepted this, rising without a word.

He would not look me in the face or touch even the sleeve of my dress afterward. Two dismal days passed. Then I bade him to my bed, where we fell desperately upon one another as if deprived for two years, not two nights.

Resting beside him while our hearts' tumult slowed again, I said, "You were thinking of someone just now, Erik; who?"

"I thought of you," he whispered. "There is no other."

With the lightest touch I cupped my hand to his twisted cheek, encompassing as much as I could of what his mask normally concealed. "It is just the same for me. If you can believe me when I say so, then you are forgiven."

He groaned and pressed his face blindly into my palm, wetting my fingers with his tears.

Raoul's name was never spoken between us again.

Otherwise (and apart from his run-of-the-mill sulks and fits of spleen) Erik continued to show me the most constant and ardent regard. This was not as pleasant as it sounds. Worship from afar is flattering, but to be loved with consuming intensity by a person who lives cheek by jowl with all one's frailties and failings is not only exhilarating but tremendously exhausting.

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For my part, I continually reminded him what a triumph of character it was (his character as well as mine, since he managed for the most part to fulfill his side of our agreement) for me to keep my word and stay with him. Even when his deformity had acquired a strange beauty of its own in my eyes, I still called upon him (while we fervidly plundered each other's bodies) as my disgusting incubus, my foul and greedy gargoyle, my lecherous ogre.

I must have been a wise child. I knew that love worthy of the name gives not what the beloved needs, but what the beloved wants.

What Erik needed was recognition of his full humanity, in spite of his repulsive looks and criminal behavior, from another human being who addressed him as an equal. What he *wanted* was to worship a woman exalted by both quality and attainment who could be repeatedly persuaded to descend to the level of his own base and hideous physicality, thus demonstrating again and again her exceptional love for him.

As for me, I exulted in each leap from my pedestal. What lesser achievement could be worth such a plunge into the bestial, ecstatic depths?

Well, we were opera folk. Only extremes would do.

So I continued to merit his devotion and my own self-respect, despite and because of the fact that I lived for that shudder of delicious horror when he laid his hand on me, and the exquisite creeping of my skin into tiny peaks at the touch of his wet, misshapen lips. In my eager body, he took his revenge many times over on all the well-made men in the world. I suppose I had my vengeance too, although I do not know upon whom.

Perhaps I harp on this "distasteful" subject. Perhaps I should refer more circumspectly to the craving of my ghastly Caliban for the delights of the flesh. Or is Caliban's craving acceptable but not his gratification? And what of *my* desires and delights? I can guess what Raoul de Chagny would have said had I begged of him those kisses thought in his world to be proper only between men and their whores.

Between the Opéra Ghost and myself, nothing was "proper" or "improper." "Morality" meant my dictum that he must not express his critical judgment by murdering people who annoyed him.

For the rest, we consumed each other with willful abandon, two starvelings at a feast.

After an early phase of keeping me close (I had expected this and endured it patiently), he began to open his world to me. He showed me the trapdoors and passages he used to get quietly about the Opéra. The Phantom patrolled "his" theatre often, restless, watchful, and intensely critical of all that occurred there. He seemed pleased that I found my own uses for his private pathways.

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He routinely helped himself to fresh clothes from the costume racks, altering garments to fit and returning them to be cleaned with the rest (the wardrobe mistress, grown weary of constantly undoing his tailoring, now left a selection of clothing at the very back of the racks to be worn only by the Opéra Ghost).

Taking a leaf from his book, I filched the more tattered costumes of the chorus and ballet rats, mended them in my leisure time (for I had been taught that idleness is both wasteful and a sin), and stealthily returned them again.

The Opéra girls, struggling along in their difficult and demanding world, took to leaving chocolates for their "good fairy" as well as the occasional pretty ribbon or fresh-cut bloom. If they guessed my secret, they kept it. I pitied their passions and their pains. They had no potent Angel of Music to inspire and encourage them. There was only one of those, and he devoted himself to me alone.

In time, Erik ventured outside with me. I always wore a veil and he went masked and covered in cloak and wide-brimmed hat. Some evenings he would hire a carriage and take me driving in the Bois de Boulogne to listen to gypsy music played in the restaurants there. Or we would take a night train out of town for a country walk. An enthusiastic amateur astronomer, he taught me to recognize not only the constellations but many stars by name.

In the city, we spent fine evenings strolling the grandes boulevardes. We even attended, anonymous in costume, the lavish masquerade balls given at the Opéra itself, although for us these were not precisely *social* occasions.

We always came late, and left early to avoid the midnight supper after the gala. As we danced (he was a correct but uninspired dancer) or looked on from some quieter vantage point, Erik would murmur in my ear a stream of comments on the flirtations, machinations, and vendettas that he claimed to observe transpiring around us. These vitriolic, often scurrilous remarks always made me laugh, despite my resolve not to encourage the exercise of his more malavolent humor.

On our first anniversary he gave me my own key to the iron gate of the passage to the Rue Scribe. I made frequent use of it, for living as we did we needed time out of each other's company. Most of the daily marketing he did himself, being very pleased with his skill at passing unremarked (as he imagined) among ordinary folk. Closely muffled even in warm weather, he was not, I am sure, so inconspicuous as he thought. But he was both proud and jealous of his self-sufficiency, and I took care not to intrude upon it. He often bought gifts for me—a book of poetry, a pair of gloves, a pretty bit of Meissen, or fresh flowers.

For my part, I brought back reports of the day and what occurred in it, and perhaps a colorful poster to replace one of the dreary pictures on his

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walls, a book for him from the stalls along the Seine, or a box of the little sweet meringues that he loved.

I took upon myself the task of posting the mail. I wrote to no one, but Erik was an enthusiastic, if menacing, correspondent to whomever caught his attention in the world of music. We attended most Opéra performances, seated in a sort of blind he had built in the shelter of a large, carved nymph on the wall (I always noticed with a pang the strangers seated in Raoul's old box). Afterward, Erik often addressed pages of venomous criticism to the managers, the newspapers, and to composers and artists as well.

Many of these missives I intercepted. But sometimes he mailed a letter himself while he was out, for there were occasional replies to be picked up addressed to "Erik Rouen," Poste Restante. He did not share their contents with me.

We were always buying candles and lamp oil; it took great quantities of fuel to heat and light Erik's home. He could well afford it: we lived on the spoils of years of extortion from the Opéra managers. In fact, by means of threats enforced by ingenious acts of sabotage Erik had accumulated a small fortune.

He exhibited a lordly carelessness about money, mislaying sizable sums with evident unconcern; but in the normal course of things he spent modestly on books, wine, and other minor luxuries. It was apparent that he had extracted large payments from the Opéra managers primarily to demonstrate his power over them. I was always free to draw what cash I needed for my errands abroad.

Herbs and medicines were staples on my shopping-list. Erik was prey to fevers, and to other ailments stemming perhaps from distortion of his internal organs. He had learned, of necessity, to doctor himself.

A deformity of the pelvic bones affected his carriage and his gait. His sinewy body was prodigiously strong, but the strain of holding himself straight and moving with a fluidity not natural to him caused him severe muscular tension and cramping; for the easing of which I brought home one day an almond-scented rubbing oil.

But I had hardly begun gliding my oiled palms down the long muscles on either side of his spine when he began to tremble, then to shake with dreadful, racking sobs. I was bewildered that I could have hurt him so. My touch was light, and in any case he was normally stoical, being accustomed to chronic aches and pains.

Now he gasped, "No, don't!" and twisted violently away. He sat rocking and crying, his clasped hands wedged tight between his knees as if to prevent even his own touch on his body.

This was not pain. It was grief.

I saw that while in my bed sheer lust carried him triumphant on its tide, the everyday intimacy of casual contact was more than he could

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bear. Even as an infant he must have been rarely *touched* by anyone, let alone touched kindly. The undemanding pressure of my hands had wakened in him the vast, deep-rooted anguish of that irremediable loss.

I could no more withstand this upwelling of sorrow—a child's sorrow ravaging a man's body—than he could. All childhoods leave scars. Old hurts of my own throbbed in bitter sympathy with his. I fled to walk by the lake, filled with impotent rage against the common cruelty and indifference of humankind. And I cursed my own deficiency in that same cruelty and indifference; placed as I was, how much pity could *I* afford?

But I could not let the matter rest. The next day, with great difficulty, I persuaded him to let me try again on the understanding that he must stop me when his emotions threatened to overpower him. He did so, saying in a strained whisper, "Thank you, Christine!" Persevering in this fashion we extended his endurance to well over an hour at a time. Rubbing him down became a routine for which I searched out fine oils and salves on my forays above ground.

It was strange, how the slow, wordless process of kneading the knots and torsions out of his muscles wove a spell of peace over us both. In those placid hours of mute, almost animal tranquility nothing was to be heard but our breathing, mine effortful and deliberate, his marked by the occasional painful gasp or deep, surrendering sigh.

I had no great experience at massage, and, as I discovered, no healing gift. I could soothe and sweeten, but I could not mend. Yet he came to openly look forward to these sessions, which he clearly valued and benefited by.

So did I. In the attentive handling of his gnarled and canted body I could express my tenderer feelings without putting myself at his mercy, which quality I knew to be in short supply and that unreliable at best.

For his more intractable pains I bought laudanum, which he hated because it clouded his mind but accepted from me when all else failed.

Abroad alone in the noisy streets, I looked at the tradesmen bustling about their business, the ladies with their parasols or their muffs, the swaggering gentlemen swinging their canes, the very sparrows pecking the pavements; and I considered escape. Once or twice I thought I saw Raoul, but this was only fancy. Nor did I need his help, nor anyone's.

At any time, I might have betrayed Erik to the authorities. Or I might have silently slipped away with enough of his money to buy my passage back to Sweden, or to anywhere.

But what could it mean, to wander freely in the wide, inhospitable world, when the dark angel whose life I shared owned all Paris at night? How could social chatter or the giggling gossip of friends rival the joy of spinning melody out of empty air, with Erik standing rapt like some lightning-struck Titan or else raising his awful head to embrace my song and lift it with his own supple and ravishing voice?

Whenever I seriously contemplated flight, I had only to remind myself

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that beyond the Rue Scribe gate I was just another woman going about her domestic business. In the house under the Opéra, I was someone potent enough to raise fallen Lucifer into the splendor of Heaven, again and again. Underground, we soared.

And I had given my word.

I cannot pretend to know all that he felt. My absences seemed to increase his attachment to me. Perhaps the risk brought him to the sharpened edge of life, reminding him of his younger, more adventuresome years. I do know that he dreaded that one day I would fly for good, lured by some stranger's wholesome beauty. It need not be Raoul. Any man was handsomer than Erik.

Often he followed me clandestinely through the streets. I made no objection. I had observed how the lovers of pretty singers imagined treachery where there was none. So long as Erik could see for himself how I comported myself when I was abroad "alone," he would be better able to hold his fear and suspicion in check.

I always knew he had been tracking me when he questioned me upon my return: whom had I seen or spoken to, by what route had I gone to the stationer's? At my answers (which he knew by his own furtive observation to be true) he exuded such a vibrancy of relief and joy that my own heart was invariably lightened.

But I wondered sometimes whether it was right and good to make him happy, for by any sane standard he was a wicked man.

I could not deny that it pleased me to dissolve his rages, griefs, and anxieties into something approaching, and sometimes far exceeding, contentment. Doing so made life with him pleasanter, of course; but beyond that, such ease as I could grant him seemed all the sweeter in the giving for being completely gratuitous.

Was I, then, wicked too? I went into a church one damp afternoon and prayed for guidance on this point. As usual in my experience none was forthcoming, so I used the time to assess my spiritual situation, and, insofar as it was perceptible to me, his.

All that I had been taught told me that in due course God must condemn Erik to the torments of Hell. To pardon him would be outrageous: what of Joseph Buquet, whose murder cried out to Heaven? Or the woman crushed beneath the counterweight, which Erik had thrown down in a fit of pique? "Thou shalt not kill"; having made that law, God must surely punish a murderer.

Not being God, however, I could do otherwise, like disobedient Eve. I already had: I had comforted the wicked, and gladly.

As I saw it, I could repent of my error and henceforth grudgingly yield up only the bare minimum of my promise. Or I could willfully continue to offer to Erik, for whom life in this world was already Hell and always had been, such solace as I had power to confer.

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This latter course, for good or ill, was the one I chose. How could I not? It might be all the mercy there is.

That evening he sat behind me brushing my hair as I read aloud from the *Revue Musicale* about a new production of *Tristan and Isolde*. He interrupted to remark how my long tresses glowed in the lamplight. Had I taken off my hat and veil to let the sun shine on my hair, chancing recognition and exposure?

"It was raining," I said. "I spent much of the day sheltering in a church, and of course I kept my hat on. But the softened air is doubtless healthy for the hair even so."

With a sigh he pressed his naked face to the back of my neck. My blood leaped. He stroked my skin, following with his fingertips the beat of that thick pulse which shook me softly from root to crown. "How can you give up the freedom of the day and come back to this dim grave where neither sunlight nor rain ever falls?"

What could I answer that he did not already know? Wordless, I leaned my throat into his hand, the warm, muscular, bloodstained hand of the Minotaur of the Opéra labyrinth.

"But I forget," he added in low and husky tones, "you are a northern girl and used to darkness from your childhood. Turn and kiss your darkness, Christine; he loves and misses you."

The sun's finest glories—its corona and its great, flaring prominences—only show when the moon eclipses it completely; he had told me that. I meant to remind him of it as he bent close over me, shrouding my face in his shadow. But I had already given up my mouth and my breath, and later, I forgot.

Another time, having been delayed an hour past when I had said I would be back, I found unlocked the door to the gunpowder room (which he had planned to blow up, obliterating himself along with the Opéra and everyone in it, if I had refused him). While I was gone he must have paced among the neatly stacked little barrels of death, goading the sleeping demon of his fury to make sure it was still alive and purposeful in case I failed to reappear.

I did not become pregnant. God cannot admire brainlessness in his creatures, to whom he has gone to the trouble to give very good brains indeed. In all likelihood Erik was sterile, like most sports of Nature. Still, I regularly used certain preparations to subdue my fertility as best I might. Erik agreed wholeheartedly with this practice. He said he had no wish to perpetuate the horrors of his own childhood (nor, I believe, to share my attention with a helpless and demanding infant).

We did quarrel sometimes, as couples do. The newspapers were a constant provocation, for Erik's political views were barbaric.

I maintained that the world would benefit from rather more kindness and mutual care than from less, as he himself had reason to know. He es-

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poused brutal notions of social order, supporting his position with blood-curdling accounts of punishments and tortures he had seen in his travels. As men are both wicked and foolish, he said, they must have priests to keep them penitent and kings to keep them obedient, and the harsher the better.

Sometimes he mocked my "naïveté" and "tender-heartedness" so pitilessly that I left the room in tears. It always ended in his kissing my hands and begging a penance for having upset me; but his Draconian ideas never changed.

He deplored the new freedom of the press from government censorship, but devoured news of sensational crimes, which excited his most wrathful responses: "Listen to this, Christine! A water-carrier in Montmartre has beaten his infant daughter to death, having first burnt her in the kitchen fire. He threw her body into a bucket of slops and went to sleep in his bed. The French working man is the only brute beast in the world with the vote!"

Looking up from my sewing I replied as steadily as I could, "Then what a good thing that now, by law, his surviving children must go to school, where they can learn to be less brutal than their father and to use their votes intelligently."

"You cannot teach an ass to sing," he said scathingly, casting the newspaper down at his feet. "Republicanism is no more than government by brutes representing brutes."

I could not resist answering. "Yet some say that poor people are better off now, and that your 'brutes' do no worse than all the monarchs and dictators France has had in this century."

"Precisely the problem!" he said triumphantly. "There has been no political stability since the Terror, and there never will be so long as the mob is encouraged in rebellion. Without public order no nation can prosper, but your common man hates nothing so much as the rule of law."

I said, "Can *you* speak of the 'rule of law'?"

Bending upon me a very knowing and ironic glance he said, "Why, I think I know a little about it."

I saw that he referred to the rule of *my* law that he had accepted over his own conduct; and I had no ready answer.

He nodded approvingly. "Good, you had best not argue further. You are a fine student of music, but careless and ill-informed when it comes to other matters."

"I do the best I can," I retorted, "having little education myself except in music."

"Weak," he said, "a very weak answer, Christine. But you are of the weaker sex, so I suppose I must allow it; which is how your weakness weakens me." He held up his hand to check my objection. "This is implicit in our bargain, by which you secured the right to wind me round your

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little finger. I make no complaint. But do not imagine your authority to be absolute, however compliantly I may bend to your will; I am an ugly man, not a stupid one."

"Erik," I said, "the last word I would ever apply to you is 'stupid.' Will you tell me plainly what you mean?"

"No more than I have said," he replied, and with that he got up and returned, humming to himself, to a project that he had recently begun behind locked doors.

A few days after this exchange, he invited me to accompany him to the public execution of a convicted murderer outside La Roquette Prison. I accepted. I had never witnessed such a degrading spectacle but felt that I was sworn to share Erik's life as fully as I might. And I did not like him saying that I was weak.

As we joined the crowd of spectators (which was dismayingly large for such a happening, and on such a cold dawn), a man hissed sharply, "Look, Death-mask is here!" They drew aside before us. Erik strode the path thus made for him with princely hauteur, and I saw people reach furtively to touch his cloak as he passed. We ended much nearer to the guillotine than I wished to be.

Of what followed, the less said the better. The curious can still see such things for themselves.

My companion offered no comfort. Erik's scorn for the doomed criminal, the presiding officials and the watching crowd was boundless, his approval of the execution itself unclouded by any hint of empathy or horror. He clearly did not imagine himself pinned beneath the roaring blade, for all that he was guilty of extortion, two murders at least, and, I was sure, much else.

On the way home, profoundly disturbed by what we had witnessed, I said accusingly that the people had seemed to know him there, as if by his repeated presence.

"Yes, the habitués see me often," he replied, his mask gleaming pale as a skull in the dimness of our carriage. "But they do not know me. No one knows me but you, Christine."

"Yet I do *not* know," I said, "why you join the mob you profess to despise in this depraved and disgusting diversion!"

"To see done such justice as is to be had in this world," he said, "and to remind myself what death is. Also I like to think that my presence lends some distinction to the proceedings. They miss me when I am absent, and sometimes call upon the executioners to wait a little in case I am only delayed."

I never discovered whether he was joking about this. He was fully capable of it.

After that, I always went with him to La Roquette. I never grew used to it. Yet I went. The satisfaction he took in these gruesome displays

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forced me to acknowledge that subjection of his crueler impulses to my ban was not the same thing as change in his own character. It is very tempting to overestimate one's influence upon another.

It must also be said that, disdaining everyone equally, Erik did not share the common prejudices of the time. He did not hate the English or the Germans more than other nations, and he taught me to recognize the ingrained anti-Semitism and xenophobia of the French (which I had taken for granted) for the spiteful, willful ignorance that it was and is.

But he was no champion of the downtrodden; his sympathies were reserved entirely for himself. He frequently worked up a fine passion of resentment over the availability to others of advantages that he had never enjoyed. There was nothing to do but wait out these moods of bitter self-pity.

Nor could I persuade him away from the vengefulness his life had taught him. Given the nature of that life, it was perhaps arrogant of me to have tried.

As for the secret project conducted behind locked doors, it proved to be his gift to me that Christmas. I gave him a dressing gown sewn of velvet patches I had cut from discarded costumes. He gave me a replica in miniature of the Taj Mahal that he had carved and painted in wood. He had once visited that monument to tragic love to examine and memorize every detail, an adventure in itself that he recounted zestfully to me over our holiday meal.

Indeed, a whole lifetime of hitherto unshared incident was lavished upon me during my years with him, like fine wine poured eagerly for my delectation and delight.

Had I been older and more experienced, I might have tried to reply in kind. This would have been an error. He did not need a *past* from me, having a rather over-rich one of his own. It was my *present* that he desired, all the immediate hours and days that I had promised him. And these I gave with open hands.

No doubt some would rather hear that we fought incessantly, that I tired of him or he of me, that we failed each other and parted in mutual hatred and disillusion. Had we lived in some suburb or narrow street of Paris, or worse yet on some grand boulevard, we might have come to that. Many marriages are stoven and sunk on the rocks of Parisian life.

Now and again, he reminded me that he had intended for us to vacate the Opéra cellars and lead a "normal" life like everybody else. I was always quick to point out that he was not in the least like everybody else, and for that matter, on the evidence at hand, neither was I; and eventually these objections ceased.

As the end of our time together drew near, he became markedly morose and irritable. I saw that he was already grieving.

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I walked through the streets and squares in chilly rain and fitful sun that last winter, chafing unbearably for my freedom now that it loomed so close. More than once I nearly flung the key to the Rue Scribe gate into the Seine. I longed to be borne quietly away on some gliding river-barge, empty-handed and friendless perhaps but bound by no pledge or promise.

At the same time I struggled to find some way to extend my time with Erik. I could not imagine a life without him. Restless and distraught, I thought of every possibility a hundred times over and rejected them all as many times.

It seemed to me that any meddling with the deadline I had set would undercut and cheapen all that we had achieved together, making a liar of me and a fool of him. Sooner or later our hard-won mastery of ourselves must surely decline into a wretched and debasing struggle for mastery of each other. I had first pledged myself to him in ignorance; now I knew the enormity of the task, and the thoughtless self-confidence of my youth was gone. How much longer could I trust myself to be bold enough, quick enough, steady enough, my instincts true enough, for both of us?

Whole lifetimes spun out in my mind as I searched for a different conclusion. But I could find nothing acceptable other than to keep to the terms of our bargain. It is when Faust tries to fix the transient moment beyond its natural term, saying "Stay, thou art fair!" that he is lost.

I wandered miserably through Erik's rooms, touching papers and furniture and books when what I ached to do was to touch him, to press him close with feverish possessiveness. I often felt his gaze upon me, scalding with similar, unspoken agony.

He now suffered odd spells of lassitude, sitting for long periods with the newspaper yet scarcely turning a page, his face white as marble and his forehead moistly gleaming. My questions about the nature of this unwonted fatigue were met with withering rebuffs. But when I came upon him mixing up a dose of laudanum for himself, I demanded an explanation. He admitted that for some time he had been experiencing severe pains in his teeth.

The condition must have begun years before. Still, I blamed myself. If I had not got in the habit of bringing down the dainties left me by the dancers and chorus girls, he might not have indulged so immoderately his taste for sweets.

Now abscesses had developed, this much I could determine; and I was very worried. But Erik flatly refused to go to a dentist, who must of necessity see his face. So these sieges of toothache came and went, borne by him with his customary fortitude.

We continued our studies, although I was in poor voice, being easily brought to tears by emotional music (and there is no other kind in opera). The last piece that he sang through for me was "Why do you wake me,"

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from *Werther* (we had been discussing the French insistence upon verbal articulation at the expense of beauty of tone).

At the end, he rose from the piano and sharply shut its lid. The spell of Werther's plaint was broken as if Erik had snapped the neck of a living thing between his hands.

"When you know that I am dead," he said, "—and I will make sure you learn of it, Christine—I beg you to come back here to bury me. I hope you will continue to wear my ring until that time, when I ask that you be good enough to return it to me with your prayers before you cover me over."

He meant his mother's ring, a wreath of tiny flowers in pale gold that I had worn since the night of *Lohengrin*. I turned the ring on my finger, trying to take comfort from the fact that he spoke as if he meant to go on living in my absence. But living in what manner? I could no longer avoid that question, which had been burning in my thoughts:

"When I have gone, will you keep to your promise to be good?"

"Why should I?" he growled, shooting me an evil look. Then he quoted the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (a book he *had* read, many times over by the look of its pages), " 'Misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous.' "

My heart pounded. Suddenly we stood at the edge of a precipice. "Erik, you gave your word!"

"I am not some titled nobleman," he sneered. "I have no honor to preserve."

I said, "You wrong yourself to say so. You have held to our agreement as only an honorable man would."

He turned away without replying, dabbing at his mouth with his handkerchief, and fell to moodily rearranging the porcelain flowers on their shelf. I heard every tiny tick and brush of sound of these small actions, for I was listening harder than I ever had in my life. In my mind a cowardly voice said, *Fool, have you forgotten that he is a monster? Look at him! He will never let you go! You should have fled when you had the chance!*

"So you think I have behaved honorably?" he said at last. "Well, if I have, I am sorry for it."

Stung out of my fearful reverie, I answered with some heat, "You have no right to be! You have been happier these past years than most men are in a lifetime. Deny it if you can!"

"I do not deny it!" He turned to me with inflamed eyes, his hands clenched at his sides. "For pity's sake, Christine, must I beg? *Don't leave.* I love you. I need you. Stay with me!"

I had been braced for sarcasm and threats; this naked entreaty pierced me through. I shook my head, unable to speak.

"Set new terms, make any rules you like," he urged. "I will keep to them, you know I can!"

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"*No*," I said, "no, Erik. It is time for you to see how you get along without your Angel of Conscience. I want my freedom, which I have won fairly."

He stared at me with those burning eyes. The walls of his house pressed in upon me like dungeon walls, and I felt a fierce passion for my liberty, sparked by the dread of losing it again before ever regaining it. In my fear, I hated him.

He said, "What if I say you must return to live with me for six months of every year? It is a nice, classical solution."

I answered angrily, "It is no solution at all!"

"I don't care." His voice rose toward the loss of control that I—and perhaps he, too—dreaded. "I want *more!*"

"Erik," I said, my mouth as dry as ashes, "you are above all a musician, and musicians know better than anyone that at some point there is no *more*—no more beats to the measure, no more notes to the phrase, no more loudness or softness or purity or vibrato—or else music becomes mere noise, incoherent, ugly, and valueless. You know this to be true."

Of course he knew it. On this principle was based all his instruction and all our achievement together. I wished that he had been wearing his mask, for it was torture to watch his face.

At length he said bitterly, "You have had too good a teacher." He shielded his eyes with his hand, as he did when he wished to listen closely to my singing without visual distraction. "Have you been happy here, Christine?"

"I have been happy," I said. "I am not happy at this moment, but I *have* been happy."

"Good," he said; and that was all.

We spent those last nights stroking and kissing one another between fitful sleeps, pressed together to the point of pain and past it. He stayed till morning in my bed. I would have held him back had he tried to go, but once he slept I quickly put the candle out. I dared not look long at his face, open and unguarded in sleep (his utmost, cleverest plea and offering), for fear that my resolve would crumble to nothing.

He was a wise child too, but I was wiser. I knew how to defend us from each other and protect us from ourselves.

A week before I was to leave, I came in from a long, troubled walk and saw him slumped at his writing desk. When I spoke to him, he answered faintly in a language that I did not know. Alarmed, I hurried to him and caught hold of his arm to bring him to himself again. My hand flew back: his whole body quaked with massive, deep-seated shudders. At my touch he collapsed, seized by such violent chills that I thought he was having convulsions.

I held him tightly to keep him from injuring himself and to warm him as best I could; and because I had to do something and could think of

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nothing else. When the shaking subsided, I helped him to his bed. I saw that the infection in his jaws had attacked again with terrifying virulence: his face was swollen, his skin was searingly hot, and it was evident that he did not know me.

In his first lucid moment, I implored him to let me bring a doctor. He was adamant against it, made me swear to bring no one, and would not be persuaded otherwise by anything I said.

He had committed no crimes since my taking up residence with him, of that I am certain; but he still had old deaths to answer for, and he was absolutely unwilling to risk exposure to the claims of the law. Perhaps now he could imagine his own goblin-head under the blade at La Roquette, before the greedy eyes of the crowd.

I imagined it; and I could not bear the thought.

So I nursed him as best I could, with drugs, folk remedies, and treatments that I found described in the medical texts on his shelves. It was not enough.

He had no pain, the nerves in his teeth being destroyed by then, but fever devoured him before my eyes. He ate nothing and kept down little of the medicines I prepared for him. At last he sank into a heavy sleep from which he rarely roused.

Late one afternoon he said, "I am so thirsty, Christine; the Devil is coming for me, and his fires are very hot!"

"No," I said, "God is coming to apologize to you for your afflictions. It is His burning remorse that you feel."

"What angel shall I send to comfort and befriend you when I am gone?" he asked. "The Angel of Death?"

"Don't talk, it only tires you." I poured him some water, spilling more than went into the cup.

"Never mind," he muttered when he had taken a few dribbling sips, "that angry angel has not done my bidding for some time now. But I should curse you somehow before I die."

"*Curse* me?" I cried. "Oh, Erik, why?"

His febrile gaze fastened hungrily upon my face. "Because you will be alive and abroad in the world, and I will be dead, down here. Your hair will glow like polished chestnuts in the sunlight when you throw off your hat and veil. If I had had such hair, I would have ventured onto the stage despite everything. With really good makeup, would it have been so bad?"

"I hate my hair!" I said. "I'll cut it off."

"It will grow back," he answered dreamily. "As many times as you cut it, it will grow back more beautiful than ever, for the delight of other men."

"Well, go on and curse me, then!" I said fiercely, but other words echoed in my thoughts: *I will not let thee go, unless thou bless me.* Fresh, amaz-

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ing tears flooded my eyes; I had thought myself drained dry as the Gobi by then.

"Oh, don't cry," Erik said with feeble exasperation. "What have you to cry about? Now I cannot fail my promise. Look, I will make you another: should this 'honor' you have required of me win me a few hours' respite from Hell, I will spend them singing for you. Listen sometimes and you may hear me." Then he exclaimed, "My opera! Where is my *Don Juan?"*

He struggled to sit up, gazing around the candle-lit room with that huge-pupiled stare that I remembered from my father's deathbed. It is an unmistakable look, and seeing it again all but drove the heart right out of me.

"Your work is safe," I said. "I will get it published—"

"No, no," he broke in, with some force. "Leave it. I have told you, that music is not for this epoch. You will not let them come picking and clucking over my miserable carcass, will you? Be as kind toward my music. Bury it with me; bury it all."

He caught my hand and pressed it to his malformed cheek, and only when I agreed to do as he asked did he release me. Then he sank back, white-faced and panting, on his pillows. I saw that his time was near, and that he knew it.

"Let me at least fetch you a priest," I said, for I knew he had been born into a Catholic household.

He said, "What for? I would only frighten him to death, adding to my burden of sins. You be my priest, Christine."

So I lay down in his bed and he breathed horrific details of his past into my ear. I told him that if he truly repented of the evil he had done he must be forgiven. He said, "Just *listen*, Christine." So I did; though I dozed through much of this grim catalog, being very tired by then.

The chiming fugue of his clocks all striking woke me. It was eight at night. I opened my eyes to find him quietly watching me, his face—that freakish face that was now better known to me than my own—just inches from mine. His lips were crusted from the fever and his poisoned breath fouled the air between us.

"Good, you are awake in time to see a wonder," he whispered. "This ugly monster, the Phantom of the Opéra, will make himself vanish before your very eyes; and before the eyes of everyone else there will appear, as if out of nowhere, a beautiful young woman of passion, talent, and valiant character."

I said something, "Oh, don't," or "Please." It makes no difference what I said.

His eyelids drooped and the shallow rasping of his breathing grew more regular. Unable to keep my own aching eyes open, I slept. At some later point, I heard him remark in a surprised and drowsy tone, "Do you hear birds singing, Christine? Imagine, songbirds, in a cellar! Open a door, let them out."

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That night he died.

Left alone with the cooling remains of the singular creature with whom I had spent a lifetime's passion in a handful of incandescent years, I thought I would die myself. I wished that I might, stretched out beside his corpse in that damp and fetid bed with its curtains of fresh forest green.

In a while I rose, and found that I could scarcely bear to look at him. Absent the faintest animation, his face was a repulsive parody of a human face in a state of ruin and decay. I closed his eyes and set his mask in place to hide the worst.

I said no prayers then; I was too angry and too weary and could barely drive myself to do what needed doing. I washed him and dressed him in the formal attire that he had always favored and put the ring of little flowers on his finger.

My choice would have been to turn him adrift on the lake in his boat, a hundred candles flaming on the thwarts; or to build him a pyre on the bank, like Shelley's pyre. But by then I was exhausted from tending to him, from grief, and from the not inconsiderable labor of preparing his lifeless body for its last rest.

So, with strength drawn from I know not where, I disposed him decently on my own clean bed, with his musical manuscripts piled round him as he had wished. I covered him with his opera cloak and used the patchwork robe that I had given him to cushion his head. Against his lunar skin the velvet folds glowed rich and deep, like a sumptuous setting for some pale, exotic jewel.

Seeing his face so remote and stony on that makeshift pillow, I understood that we touched no longer, he and I. We sped on invisible, divergent trajectories, driven farther apart by every passing instant. Nothing remained to keep me there.

In a trance of exhaustion I packed a few belongings and keepsakes, left the house, and tripped the concealed triggers he had shown me. A long, deep thundering sound followed, and I tasted stone-dust in the air.

Panic seized me: how like him it would be, to contrive beforehand to bring the whole Paris Opéra crashing down in ruins upon his grave!

But all was as he had told me, according to his design: stone blocks placed within the walls rumbled into their chiseled beds, sealing off every entrance and air-shaft of the Phantom's home. Erik slept in a tomb more secure than Pharaoh's pyramid.

I paced beside the underground lake, spent and weeping. Now I prayed. I was afraid for him. Apart from everything else, if he had somehow willed himself to die then that was the sin of suicide, which grows from the sin of despair.

Yet this possibility is part of every strong union. Someone departs first, and the one left behind decides whether to die, or to stay on awhile, chewing the dusty flavor of words like "desolate" and "bereft."

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In the end, fearing that somebody might have heard the noise or felt the reverberations and might come to investigate, I roused myself to the final task of sinking the little boat in the lake. Then I let myself out by the Rue Scribe gate for the last time, five years and eleven days from the night of my debut in *Faust*.

Rain had fallen overnight; puddles gleamed. A draggled white cat sheltering in a doorway watched me go.

Of my life since there is little to tell. My aged guardian having died, I was able to make arrangements to live quietly in Paris under my own name. Hardly anyone remembered the Phantom of the Opéra and the deeds attributed to him, for great cities thrive on novelty and their citizens' memories are short (that is why M. Leroux felt free to publish his nonsense later on).

I tried to avoid knowledgeable or inquisitive people. To those who knew me I said that I had been driven away by the family of a noble admirer and had been singing since in opera houses in distant lands (Raoul, I learned, had emigrated to America in the spring of 1881, shortly after my own disappearance).

While reestablishing myself, I found I could live well enough. During my years underground I had published some vocal pieces using my father's name. I continued to sell my compositions, and drew investment income as well from the remains of Erik's fortune.

But singing on the stage again disappointed me. My own voice seemed dull, and audiences—no matter how they applauded—even duller. Without an edge of fear and a need for approval, no singer can bring an audience, or a performance, to life. Having resumed my career with some success, I retired early and advertised for students. I found that I loved teaching and did it well.

Rejoicing daily in my freedom, I was nevertheless lonelier than I could bear all by myself. I took comfort where I could; there are good men from that time of whom I still think fondly. But none ever came to me trailing the clouds of sinister and turbulent glory in which the Opéra Ghost had enfolded me.

During the Great War I volunteered as a nurse. Not surprisingly, I dealt calmly with the most frightful facial wounds. Erik's awful countenance would not have been out of place on those wards, just as his music would suit perfectly the emerging character of the new century. Perhaps he was a true phantom after all, as well as a brilliant, cruel, afflicted man: a phantom of this brilliant, cruel, afflicted future.

My hospital work brought me to the admiring attention of a doctor several years my junior, and I married late in life for the first time, or so it seemed. The marriage was good, being founded in the shared trials and mutual respect of wartime service.

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To the day he died, René never knew the truth of my life before. If God holds that deception against me, I stand ready to answer for it along with everything else.

Nowadays I coach voice at the Opéra, although my own instrument has of course decayed with time. A gratifying number of well-known singers have trained with me over the years. My students are like my children, and I help them as I can, awarding to the needier ones small stipends out of Erik's money. He would not approve.

Does it seem incredible, to have gone from such a bizarre, outlaw existence to a placid one indistinguishable from millions of others? Yet many people walk through the world hiding shocking memories. I glance sometimes at a man or a woman in a shop or café, at a friend or a student sitting over a coffee with me, and I wonder what towering joys and howling depths lie concealed behind the mask of ordinary life that each one wears.

Even extraordinary lives are not entirely as they seem. Recently I discovered that the base of Erik's spaniel inkwell (into which I have just now dipped my pen) contains a secret drawer. Inside I found a sheaf of receipts all dated early in April, 1881, made out to "Erik Rouen" for large cash payments from him to various men, in settlement of the formidable debts of a third party: Raoul de Chagny.

Underneath lay a pile of bank drafts running from that time until June, 1885, four or five of them per year, for considerable amounts of money. Each had been signed by Erik in Paris, and cashed by Raoul de Chagny in the city of New Orleans.

Finally, my shaking fingers drew out an envelope, posted from New Orleans and addressed to Erik. It contained a yellowed news clipping in English, dated July 17, 1885, announcing the marriage of Raoul de Chagny, a rising young dealer in cotton, and Juliet Ravenal, daughter of a prominent local broker and businessman. With this notice was enclosed a final bank draft (for yet another of those large sums that Erik had been in the inexplicable habit of mislaying) returned to him uncashed. There was no letter.

The message was clear enough: Raoul did not come back for me because Erik paid him not to. My Vicomte had gone to America as a Remittance Man! At least he had had the decency (or pride or whatever it was) to refuse further bribes from his rival once established in his new country.

I wept over those papers and all that they implied. But I smiled, too, at the resourcefulness, the cunning, and the sheer determination of my incomparable monster, who had thus firmly secured his victory without breaking his promise to me.

Age robs me of easy sleep, and many nights I lie awake remembering the little glass shoe full of centimes; and the shivering poodle stinking of

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lamp-oil; and the brush being drawn through my heavy hair by a man who sits behind me, where I cannot see his face until I turn. In the dark, I listen for some echo of the radiant voice of my teacher, my brother, my lover and accomplished master of my body's joys, that dire, disfigured angel with whom I wrestled for over a thousand days and nights in all the youthful vigor of my hunger and my pride.

My hair is short now, in the modern style. It has turned quite white.

The Comte de Chagny (Raoul's title since his elder brother's death) arrived this month from America to see to his French holdings. He came to the Opéra asking after me. I avoided him, and he has gone away again.

Awaiting my own exit, I live my days in this brash and cynical present as other people do. But I nourish my soul on the sweet pangs of looking back, more than forty years now, to the time when the Opéra Ghost and I lived together underground, in a candle-lit world of passion and music.

I have thought of writing an opera about it, but time seems short and I know my limitations. Someone else will write it, someday. They will get the story wrong, of course; but perhaps, all the same, the music will be right. ●

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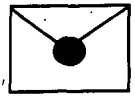

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PENDRAGON

The I.R.S. is dismantling Camelot.
Out in the lobby,
they are selling
chunks of the Round Table embedded in lucite
like pieces of the true cross.
The auctioneer sounds like a divorce lawyer
dividing up the children.
Some movie studio is bidding on the costumes;
(the auctioneer tells them the greaves will wear like iron).
An airline is already packing the castle
for shipment to an amusement park in New Jersey.
The ladies-in-waiting have all gone to nunneries,
or community colleges for degrees in Nursing.
Gawain and Galahad have gotten football scholarships to S.M.U.,
and Merlin has signed with ABC to do a series of specials
with Sigfreid & Roy.
While Arthur, son of Uther,
his sword repossessed by the Lady of the Lake Finance Co.
the toes out of his steel socks,
rust on his chain mail undershirt,
dogshit on the bottom of his shield,
stands by wondering
if it wouldn't have been better after all
to have been born to be
a king in fool's clothing,
rather than the other way around.

—William John Watkins

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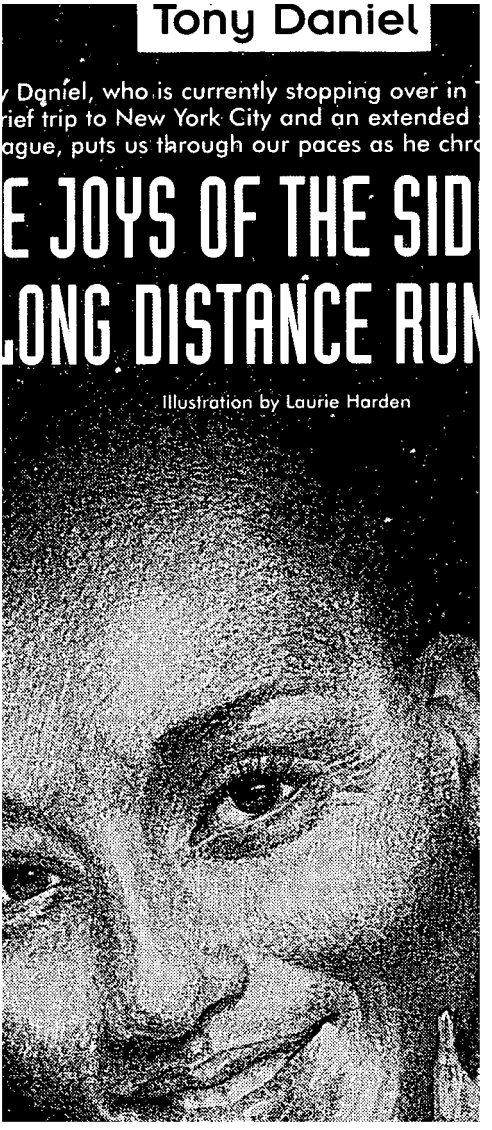
Tony Daniel
y Daniel, who is currently stopping over in
rief trip to New York City and an extended
ague, puts us through our paces as he chr
E JOYS OF THE SID
LONG DISTANCE RU
Illustration by Laurie Harden

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When Corris first started long distance running, people kept asking me if he had AIDS or were in chemotherapy. No, I would answer, my husband just runs thirty miles a day. Of course, I was understating, but if I told them the truth, they would've assumed I was telling a white lie to protect his privacy during his last days, or worse, that I was deluding myself. Perhaps they thought so anyway.

Corris came from a good family in New Orleans, sort of black aristocratic blood, if I understood him correctly. My in-laws were always completely civil to me, the barbarian from California. Since I'm not equipped to understand Louisiana politics and culture, we didn't really speak the same language, and I suppose they had little use for me. In any case, I didn't marry Corris for his connections or his sparkling personality. We met when he was a mathematics professor at Frederick Tucker College, a small liberal arts school in Orange County, and I was on the English faculty.

Although I don't like to think that we were the epitome of the late twentieth century academic couple—you know, wine-sipping, NPR-listening, politically-liberal-but-with-a-conservative-lifestyle types—that *would* be a fair description of Corris and me. But we didn't have a *lifestyle* at all, really. It was a kind of thrown-together existence, with Corris getting into the office early and coming home late. I worked at home more, but we never truly lived there all that much. The house was a shambles of papers, each of us knowing our shambles from the other's. For many years, we had a housekeeper twice a week to keep the mess from becoming too disgusting.

We both did moderately well at our jobs, but a feeling of mediocrity dogged Corris. This had something to do with his upbringing and the fact that all the DeVoes were expected not merely to distinguish themselves, but to be the absolute best at whatever they attempted. Corris had given up on being a world-class mathematician several years before I met him.

"If it doesn't happen by your mid-twenties, it isn't going to happen," he told me. "It almost happened to me. There was something, something I could almost see. Almost, but not quite, you know. As if it were around a corner I couldn't turn."

And so Corris had concentrated more on the administrative end of things, and he eventually became dean of the college. After Corris was made dean, we spent less time than ever at home. There were even more faculty mixers and fund-raisers. And we always took wonderful vacations whenever we had the time off.

We both loved travel, and we toured the world. I do not regret a moment, but perhaps Corris did. I had more of a penchant for adventure than Corris, and we did go on a couple of "adventure travel" junkets that he suffered through more than enjoyed. On the whole, however, we enjoyed one another's company and, most importantly (and with the exception of our Amazon Ecodiversity and Multicultural Encounter Expedition

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of 1988) we seemed to always like the same things about the places we visited. Corris loved the play of light on water, and we tried to collect views of the sun and moon shining on oceans, lakes, waterfalls in all the latitudes of the Earth.

Corris liked to discourse on chaos theory, fractals and such when describing our waters. Often, after a bit of an explanation, I understood him well enough, but it was clear that, while we both appreciated nearly the same sorts of beauty, we didn't share the same *feelings* about what we saw. No one ever does, perhaps, but Corris and I seemed particularly far apart. That is why, although I can tell you all about Corris's running and what it led to, I'm not sure, even today, that I understand *why*.

When Corris turned forty-five, he went for his first jog. He was somewhat vexed by aging, and he'd been putting on a tummy since becoming dean the year before. He didn't say so, but it is important for a dean to appear magisterial—lithe and in control of his passions—not indulgent and obese like, say, many a humanities professor. Although I never thought Corris's weight was getting out of hand, I noticed him looking at himself in our bathroom's full-length mirror and pulling at his lower lip. This was his gesture of worry or self-scorn.

So he started out with a mile around the neighborhood. Within a month or so, he was up to three a day, and the difference was apparent in his chin and midsection. My attraction to Corris had not been particularly physical for the first eleven years of our marriage, but I was surprised to find that I began to consider him as, well, a *specimen,* especially after he began to lift light weights a couple of times a week. I began to consider my own condition, or lack thereof, and I must say I took up running not for health, but for the sole, but unstated, purpose of looking more like Madonna.

I topped out at around five miles every other day. Until my time—that is, the speed with which I ran—came down, running for longer distances took too long. There was a limit to how much I could amuse myself by idle thoughts and mental wrestling with the problems of my day. I got plain bored with the steady repetition, the plod, of it, after about an hour or so.

Not so with Corris, however. After a month at three miles a day, he worked up to five and then, within a year, to ten. There he stayed for two years, his strength improving and his times coming down. Corris went out before breakfast, and he had to get up earlier and earlier in the morning to get in his runs. For a while, he became an enthusiast, and his conversation was filled with the wonders of exercise. He was far from fanatical about the subject, however. And soon running became as much a part of his life as eating or going to work, and we seldom talked about it *per se*. He trained for a marathon at one point. But the commitments of his job and his general non-competitive nature got in the way. On the Saturday of the marathon, he went for a twenty-seven mile run, instead.

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That may have been the turning point for Corris, for he'd never run such a distance before. We drove out to Joshua Tree and he ran within the national park while I toured around in our minivan and occasionally checked on his progress. It was a fine late autumn day in the desert. The cliffs of the nearby hills were as red as blood, and the sky was bruise blue, with the weird tangles of the Joshua trees stark against it. I went for a good five-miler myself. The air was the perfect temperature, and as dry as the moon.

I didn't notice anything peculiar after Corris was done. When we stopped on the way home at a diner in Beaumont, he was very quiet. I put it down to his obvious exhaustion. Generally, you should take a little time off after a marathon-length run to let your body heal and your muscles recover, and I was a bit concerned when, the next morning, Corris was at it again.

He took to running in the evening as well, and was putting in twenty miles a day or more a year after his "marathon." I am pretty self-sufficient, and, though we spent more time apart than ever, the time we spent together became more intense. Just so you won't wonder, the running did nothing but good things for our sex life. We stopped watching television altogether and often he would come in from a run, take a quick shower, and curl up on our tattered old couch beside me while I graded papers or read, and then we'd go to bed together.

We talked as we always had of little things—the doings at school, the news of the day. Corris had been for years working on his deficiency in having read great literature. He diligently worked through a book that I assigned him every two months or so, which is, I understand, quite an accomplishment for most mathematicians. I am ashamed to admit that I didn't return the favor as far as math went. In fact, one day in late winter when he was forty-seven and I was forty-five, I misplaced my calculator and was horrified to discover that I'd forgotten how to do long division. I almost didn't tell him, but when Corris came in from his evening run that day, I confessed. I didn't even wait for him to shower, but confronted him with the horrible fact when he walked through the door.

Corris laughed. He sat beside me on the couch, and I could feel the heat of his skin. It was a chilly day outside, and sitting next to him was like being near a pleasantly warm radiator. I ran the sleeve of my terry cloth robe over his forehead to wipe away a trace of sweat.

"So, teach me again, all right?" I said. "It wouldn't look right for the wife of the hottest number theorist in California to be mathematically illiterate."

"Don't worry. Lots of mathematicians forget how to do arithmetic," he replied. "I'm one of the minority of us who likes to just add and subtract things in my head. I know all kinds of tricks I can teach you."

"But I'm talking about division."

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"Division is a kind of subtraction, my love."

So we went over a couple of his tricks. The one I still remember is about adding up all the digits in the number to be divided, and if the sum is equal to nine, then the number is divisible by nine.

"And, of course, three," Corris said. He leaned back on the arm of the couch and I snuggled up against his chest, sweaty or not. "You know," he said after a moment, "that's what I do when I'm out running. Add things. Subtract them. It gives me the old feel I used to get from math. Like it's something I *am,* instead of something I do. Do you think I'm being . . . compulsive?"

"Does it make you happy?" I asked, and kissed the underside of his chin. I ran my arm around his back and shamelessly groped his tight little butt.

"Yeah," he said. "Yes, it does."

I kissed his neck. He tasted like tears.

"Do what you like and don't bother yourself about it," I replied, not really considering that what I was saying might mean much to him. "Why not?"

Corris tensed up. "Did I hurt you?" I asked, thinking I'd squeezed a little too hard.

He sighed, long and soft. "No," he said. "Not at all. Just the opposite."

He didn't say anything else about it, but after winter quarter was over, Corris resigned as dean and took an often-put-off one-year sabbatical. And that summer, he started long distance running.

Before dawn, he would drive over the El Cajon or Banning Pass and out into the desert. He would then spend all day running. He'd make a giant circle—fifty or sixty miles in circumference—and end up at the van just after dark. Then he'd drive home and eat mounds and mounds of pasta. He was never particularly tired after these days. Somehow, his body got used to the toil. "I'm not trying to break any speed records," he told me, when I expressed concern. "And if something hurts, I slow down, give it a rest."

This was the period when people started asking me if Corris had terminal cancer. I got worried myself and did a bit of research. Long distance runners do not look healthy, even though they are in prime condition. They are gaunt, without an ounce of body fat to spare. The best of them look like famine victims, walking—or, rather, running—skeletons. In fact, if they don't, they can't win. Corris didn't ever get to that stage. He was not genetically cut out to be a great runner, and, fortunately, he didn't care. I thought of him as *leathery*. Lying beside him was like cuddling up on an old den couch, all broken-in and crinkled and just right for resting on, or falling asleep watching old movies on, or, well, whatever.

When summer came, and my duties were done at school, I began to accompany Corris on his daily expeditions. That first day out, we drove

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past the great bank of windmills in the Banning Pass—it is a power-generating project the state erected—just as the sun was rising, and I pulled off the road. I watched the windmills body forth, take on depth and texture; they grew from flat silhouettes to a field of giant, human-made flowers, lily-white and rounded.

Corris was looking ahead, however, down the pass and onto the desert plain below. "I wish I could keep going," he said. "I wish I could run toward where the sun is now and not have to double back. I think it might mean something to do that."

"*Mean* something?"

Corris glanced out the windows at the windmills. A breeze kicked up and when it passed set some to spinning and gyrating, and then others, as if they were daisies in a meadow.

"Oh, just an idea I had last spring," he said. "A mathematical idea, actually."

"Well, why don't you?"

Corris smiled at me and rubbed my thigh. "Because I'm not going anywhere without you," he said.

I looked him in the eyes, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. "What makes you think you have to choose?"

We descended onto the high desert, and Corris began his run.

We camped out that night at a state park near the Salton Sea, and the next day, Corris was on the road again. I would drive ahead for a few miles, then park and run back to meet him. Then we'd run together up to the van. I put in a good ten or fifteen miles this way, but, for the most part, I stayed in the van and read or worked at a paper I was writing on Austen's *Emma*. Corris would run for hours and hours—sixty or seventy miles a day.

We ran across the Mojave Desert and to the Arizona line. The days were hot and blankly white. The land was piled and scattered with igneous stone that had never known life on a scree of lighter stone, broken down by millions of years of brief desert storms. I went on walks while waiting for Corris and found obsidian chunks as big as a suitcase, as long as swords. At high noon, I would make sure Corris drank a couple of quarts of water. He went through several gallons a day. Back in Orange County, where the temperature hovered in the seventies most of the year, having air conditioning in the minivan had seemed decadent, but now I was glad of it. The heat didn't seem to bother Corris, however. In fact, he claimed it gave him strength. After he drank his water, I would stand and watch him jog down the road, over the next rise and out of sight, a glistening spot of blackness against the blue-hot sky.

Corris was taking a water break near the sand dunes of Yuma when he told me he wanted to run all night. Was this too much? I could not say. All I knew was that Corris was not merely content, as I'd always known

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him, but truly happy. I could have stopped him. I don't know if I were the best person he could have picked to keep an eye on reality and make sure he didn't jog off the brink, but I was the one he chose, the one he trusted. I didn't ask him to stop running. I did ask him something we had refrained from talking about to that point.

"Why? Why do you want to do that?" I asked. "And when are you going to stop?"

Corris chuckled, and poured a little water over his head. It ran through his close-cropped hair and down his neck and shoulders.

"I don't know when it's going to happen," he said.

"When *what's* going to happen? What is 'it'?"

"Well, I'm not really sure of that either." He handed the water bottle back to me. "Is this getting to be too much for you, love?"

"No. No, Corris. We're spending more time together than we ever have before. I'm not sure we're getting the same thing out of the experience. . . ."

"I think that I've turned that corner I never could when I was younger," he said. "You are a sort of catalyst, actually. You and running. But if you're worried that I've gone batty, then I'll call it off and—"

I shook my head. "If you would just tell me what's going to happen, maybe I would understand."

"I need the stars."

"What do math and the stars have to do with running?"

"Running *is* counting to me. It's a kind of arithmetic."

"And the stars?"

"They are moving away from us at a fixed rate because the universe is expanding all at the same time. With the sun, you have to take the earth's motions into account—I mean the angular momentum and the wobble and other rotational deviations. But the stars are far enough away."

"Far enough away?"

"Yes," he said. "I want to run underneath the stars."

I went into Yuma and bought a reflective vest at a sporting goods store and insisted Corris wear it after sunset. And that evening, after he'd put in more than sixty miles, we didn't find a campground or hotel. Instead, Corris kept running. He ran through the night, and I followed close, with the lights on him all the way. Around midnight, I couldn't stay awake any longer. We were on a relatively untraveled road, so I pulled off and got some sleep—and he kept going. When I woke, it was around eight o' clock in the morning. I hurried up the road and found him, still jogging along, nearly fifty miles ahead. We ate breakfast—some bacon and eggs that I fried up on our Coleman stove—and Corris was off again.

Something had happened. There was no mistake. Corris was completely refreshed. He seemed as if he had only been out for a short turn around

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the block. There was nothing manic about him, either, so I couldn't assign this effect to some adrenaline rush or hormonal over-production. And after he'd been running for forty-eight hours, I began to wonder at my own sanity.

"It's finally happening," he said as we ate dinner that night at a roadside picnic table. "I worked out a way of combining n-space geometries with a special arithmetic I came up with. It's really elegant, if I do say so myself."

"Corris, you've run two hundred fifty miles and you don't even feel it."

"Yes," he said between gigantic bites of pasta. "Time is like shadows, you know. It's only the fourth dimension perceived at a certain slant. Shadows are long in the morning and evening, short at noon. It's all in the play of light."

I stayed in a hotel that night near Tucson, and caught up with Corris near the New Mexico border the next morning. There he turned north because, he said, he'd always wanted to visit Monument Valley. The land began to rise, and we crossed juniper-specked hills and dusky valleys of broken rock. Then it flattened out, flattened except for the great sheets of magma that had risen through the world's cracks and frozen there, tempered to a hardness by the cold crust. And then the crust wore away, leaving those stone curtains and ramparts. I felt as if I were driving through a landscape that poked in and out of that fourth dimension Corris was talking about, through ruins of castles that never were, that always would be—just out of eyesight, just around some corner we could never turn.

But Corris turned it, thirty miles out of Kayenta. I was driving behind him, slowly, when it happened. The sky was clear and the moon was out, nearly full. Corris was a silver and black shimmer on the road before me. I was watching him through bleary eyes. I was watching him, and he was bending sideways, at a forty-five degree angle to the ground, yet seeming to run as if level. I rubbed my eyes, but it did no good. Corris dipped lower and lower, like a needle gauge.

And then he dipped into the road and disappeared.

I gunned the accelerator, expecting to find him collapsed in front of me, all of this finally taking its toll upon him, reality finally catching up with him. But he was not there. I got out of the van and searched about. I cried out in despair and searched some more. Maybe I'd stopped too soon, not in the right place. I got in the van and drove further along.

It was then that I noticed something peculiar in the headlights. It was the road itself, the light of the moon on the road, moving, *wrinkling*. I drove closer and saw that it was Corris. *In* the road.

It was as if he were flattened out and running sideways through the asphalt. But this was nothing like a picture or projection at all. He was *there*. He flowed through the texture of the roadway, the tar rubble, the

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traffic stripes, the pebbles. His head was facing toward the middle of the road and his feet toward the edge. And then he spun around even further and all I could see were the soles of his running shoes, clopping regularly down the middle of the highway's right lane, as if he were running upside down.

I rolled down the window. "Corris," I yelled. "Stop that!"

I don't know if he heard me, but he reappeared, sideways again, but now his feet were facing the middle stripe and his head was toward the edge. And slowly but steadily, he emerged from the road, and returned to running upright. I zoomed past him, parked, and ran back.

He was smiling like a happy kid, and laughing so much he'd set himself to gasping. "That was interesting," he said. "Very interesting."

"You scared me to death! You really frightened me!" I found that I was shouting without realizing it.

"I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to. But I couldn't have predicted when it would happen."

And then I reached Corris and hugged him to me. "I want you to stop now. I want you to stop running and go home with me." He kept going a few steps, almost by instinct, I'm sure, before he finally came to a halt.

"It's really quite safe," he said. "As long as I keep counting."

"Oh, Corris." I was crying, and since his shirt was damp with sweat, he used my blouse to wipe the tears. I sniffed, gathered my wits. The stars were bright and hard against the hard land. The moon was directly above us, and we cast no shadows. "I didn't mean it," I said. "If you need to keep running, to keep counting, then go ahead. I'll be with you. I was just frightened by the suddenness of it, what you did."

Corris took a deep breath. He looked down at his feet and chuckled. "It's very strange, you know, standing still." He looked up at me and stretched out his arms. Then he twisted his left wrist. Not down or up or sideways, but twisted it nonetheless. His hand disappeared. Then I saw the muscles of his lower arm flex and his hand reappeared.

"Well," he said. "I've run far enough."

We walked back to the van arm in arm under the moon and stars. I checked the odometer.

"Seven hundred and eleven miles from Yuma," I said. "It's divisible by nine."

We went inside, lay on the cot in back, and I held Corris to me. He ran a finger along my side, cupped a breast, but when I tried to kiss him, I found that he was fast asleep and gently snoring.

I have taken a sabbatical myself. I didn't realize how much I needed it until I actually packed my things. Corris and I have flown to Africa, to Kenya, to run on the veldt. We've rented out a Land Rover, and equipped ourselves with water and supplies.

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The mathematics isn't nearly as hard as I thought it would be. All those years of small college teaching have given Corris more insight into explaining things than a post at some high-powered research institute ever would. He is patient and thorough with me. I really don't have to grasp the complexities of the math, he claims.

"What's important is the *way* you count," he told me. "You have to let the counting become *you*. It's like a complicated hopscotch rhyme, in a way."

"Or a poem," I replied.

"After you get the hang of it, it's incredibly fun," he said. "You don't get tired and you see . . . around things . . . with new eyes. I can write out the equations, but I can't describe it. Maybe you can."

Getting into shape for the run has proved to be the most difficult part of our arithmetic safari. But this place is beautiful beyond words. Corris needed the starkness of the desert, the embodiment of Platonic mathematical archetypes, but I'm sure that being surrounded by, being part of, a living, growing land is where I must be if I'm to succeed.

Do I want to succeed? Corris says he wants to verify and extend his findings before he publishes, although I cannot imagine that the sight of a mathematician twisting himself into the ground then back out again might not be convincing enough in itself.

The truth is, we are having the time of our lives on vacation, and we don't want to give it up just yet. It is two months into our trip, and I have been running for quite a ways now. Corris sometimes runs with me, but he is taking time for other things. He's bought a good camera and has gone out shooting for elephant and rhino. I am on a dirt road and he drives ahead of me a ways, sets up his tripod, and takes pictures while I catch up. We sleep in the Rover, on a pallet under the sunroof—but it becomes a star roof at night. We have been to southern Kenya before, but I remember our other trips as if they all took place in the daylight; I cannot recall the night skies. Now I see strange, equatorial stars, shapes so different from California's. I will be running beneath them, soon.

And today, this day, I am feeling very fine. I am feeling more than fine, actually. The ground springs beneath my strides and the sun has quickly traversed through the billowing clouds like a searchlight playing across the sky. I can see the shadows contract and lengthen as if I were running through a time-lapse film. But it is all three dimensional, and I feel wonderful.

Up ahead, a dust cloud rises from the Rover's approach. Corris flashes the headlights, and parks. He gets out and has stretched his legs by the time I reach him. We run along together. He is beaming with satisfaction.

"I saw a herd of gazelle," he says. "They charged right past me; chuffed up dirt and grass all around me. I swear I could smell them, they were so close. It was great, just perfect."

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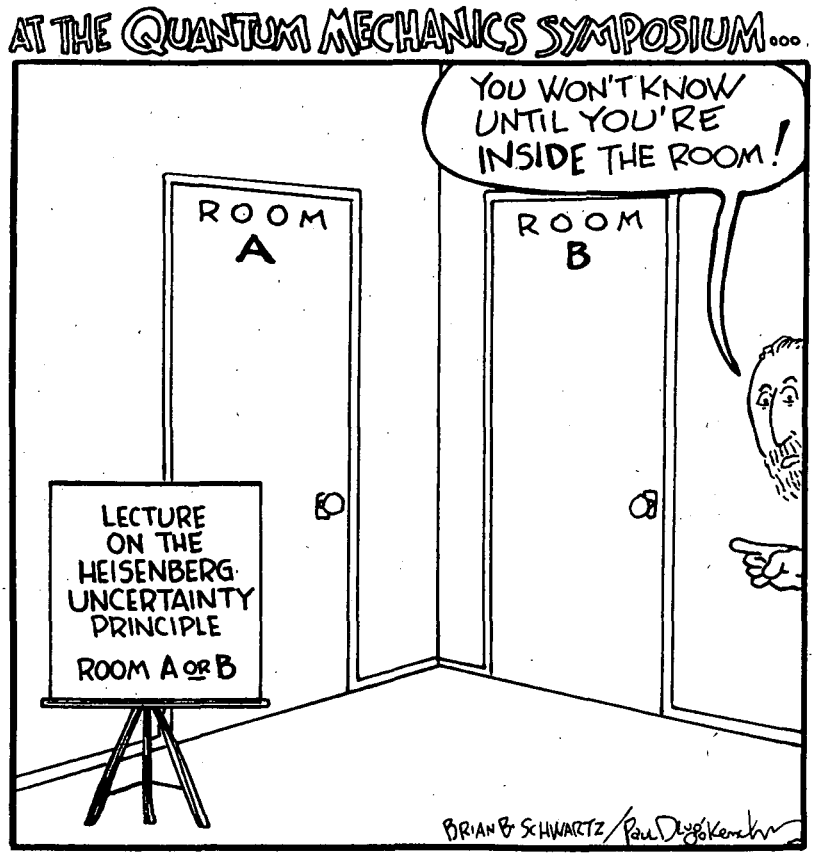
"Did you get any pictures?"

"Well, no. But I saw them."

We speak no more, but hold hands as we run. After a couple of miles, Corris doubles back to pick up the Rover. I go on, counting to a rhythm of insect rattle, the sunlight play on muddy watering holes, the rustle of wind and antelope through grass. When the sun sets today, I think I will keep on running, into the evening. I believe I will run through the night, and count my steps under the light of these steady African stars. ●


AT THE QUANTUM MECHANICS SYMPOSIUM...
YOU WON'T KNOW UNTIL YOU'RE INSIDE THE ROOM!
ROOM A
ROOM B
LECTURE ON THE HEISENBERG UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE
ROOM A OR B
BRIAN B SCHWARTZ / Paul Dygokenchy

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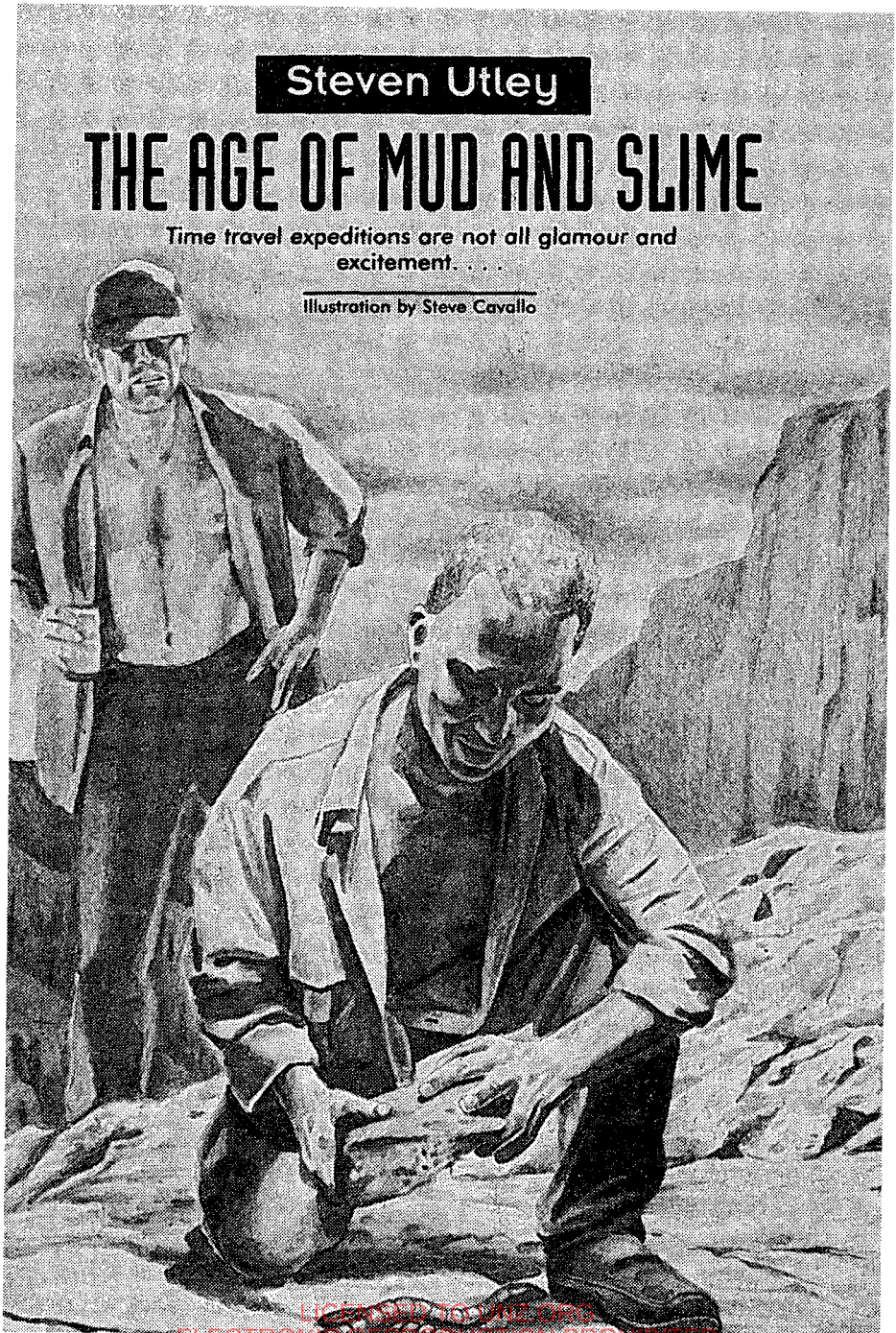
Steven Utley

THE AGE OF MUD AND SLIME

Time travel expeditions are not all glamour and excitement. . . .

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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It was another bright, balmy, beautiful morning, and their rocky perch above Stinktown afforded the three shipmates an excellent view. Haze and distance softened the outline of the eroded remnants of the Taconian highlands. That ancient range was now only barren hills. Its substance, reduced by wind and water to particles of grit, had washed down to form great banks of estuarine mud in the bays and inlets of the submergent coastline. Low tide at Stinktown exposed acres of glistening, iridescent muck.

It had no attraction for Walls, Berry, and McNiel. There was nothing to see out on the tidal flats except arthropods poking around in search of breakfast, scientists poking around in search of specimens, and other bored navy men poking around just for the hell of it. Moreover, estuarine mud was glutinous and full of bubbles of gas produced by the decaying organic matter within it, so that one not only risked becoming mired with every step but also released a potent whiff of rotten eggs. The air on the heights was much sweeter.

Beyond the tidal flats was a broad, shallow bay where a navy ship lay anchored amid its brood of auxiliary craft. The ship represented everything sailors came ashore to escape, but the consensus was that Stinktown itself had very little more to offer. Stinktown was a collection of tents and Quonset huts at the edge of a marshy area overgrown with tiny stem-like plants and infested, word had it, with centipedes the size of dachshunds. The approved pastimes available to enlisted personnel on liberty—soccer, softball, movies, virtual realities—were good for an hour or two each, if one were in the mood. There was 3.2 beer at the exchange; getting drunk on it entailed real work, but a determined man could do it. Hard liquor was difficult though not impossible for navy men to obtain. Other illicit diversions were good only until one's stake was gone, or tempers flared, or the shore patrol hove into view. There were no women, unless one counted female officers and scientists, and there was no point in counting them. Female officers were, of course, strictly off limits. Scientists, male and female alike, belonged to an incomprehensible alien species. Each scientist seemed to be crazy in his or her own way, but all of them seemed to exist in a state of constant excitement, which naturally made them objects of both scorn and resentment to men hard-pressed to achieve even intermittent excitement.

All along the coast, longshore currents had cut the divides between neighboring valleys into headlands. It was to one of these low, steep cliffs that Walls, Berry, and McNiel had retired with their beer coolers. From atop the cliff they could look back into the drowned river valley, or down upon a narrow beach and the slender crescent of a tombolo linking an islet to the mainland, or out across the shimmering surface of the Iaepetus Ocean. They wasted little time admiring the view, however. They were men with a mission and went at their weak beer with fierce resolve.

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As morning passed quickly into midday, they went often, singly or en masse, to the cliff's edge and relieved themselves, to the accompaniment of much self-congratulation, onto the beach below. They had managed to get themselves somewhat beyond the feel-good stage of inebriation, though they were still somewhat shy of the feel-nothing stage, when Berry vehemently declared that he had seen all the Silurian Period had to offer and would not give two cents for any of it.

It had been obvious to his buddies since coming ashore that he was building to an eruption. Therefore, when it came, Walls gave no sign of noticing it. He had opened his shirt, stretched himself out on a nearly level slab of rock, and pulled his cap down over his eyes. His wiry black arm dangled over the edge of the slab, and a beer dangled from his fingertips; he swung it gently, like a pendulum, keeping time as he hummed some indefinite tune. It was barely audible above the crash of waves breaking against the beach. For his part, McNiel took a long, unsatisfying pull on his beer, belched resonantly, and said, "Prehistoric times sure suck, all right."

"Five billion years of Earth history," Berry said, "and this has got to be the wettest and dullest stretch of all."

"Can't even watch the grass grow," McNiel said mildly.

"What I'd give to have a dinosaur in my sights right now."

McNiel asked, "What sights?" and when Berry took aim at an invisible target with an imaginary rifle, "What dinosaur?"

"Like it goddamn matters. This is the first tour I've ever done where a seventy-two-hour liberty's actually bad for the morale of enlisted personnel."

McNiel grinned. "You think it's just bizarre coincidence the enlisted women never come ashore when the enlisted men do?"

Although he continued to swing his arm in time, Walls left off humming to say, "The navy doesn't want you unmarried fellows getting laid. Might dull your fighting edge."

"We might's well go queer," McNiel told Berry. "That'd show the navy."

Berry's mouth twisted with disgust. "All I know is, I've never been so bored in one place in my whole life."

"Beer's pretty lousy, too," said McNiel.

Walls interrupted his humming again. "Beer doesn't time-travel well. It's all that shaking up it gets when it comes through the hole. Knocks the fizz right out of it."

"Izzat a fact?"

"Well, it's a theory." Walls went back to humming.

"I got my own theory," McNiel said. "Some contractor back home's selling the navy canned horse piss." Nevertheless, he sucked out the last foamy mouthful before crumpling the can and flipping it into the cooler nearest him. There was an entire stratum of crumpled cans in there; he started to dig down through it with both hands.

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"I can't believe," Berry said to Walls, "this is your second tour."

"What's not to believe? Here, you get most of the perks of submarine duty and none of the claustrophobia."

"Uh oh," said McNiel. "We're about out of brew. How'd that happen?"

"Three coolers full of bad beer," Walls murmured, "divided by three desperate sailors. Take the rest of mine if you want it. I'm so full now I'll be pissing like a freight train for days to come."

"You only got one left."

"Drink it."

"Then what'll we do?"

Walls yawned. "Sober up, I guess."

"Unless," Berry said to McNiel, "you wanna haul yourself down to Stinktown and bring back another cooler. I'm so looking forward to spending more time up here, trying to get shitfaced on three-two."

McNiel actually appeared to consider it for a moment. Then he cast a doubtful eye skyward. "Be getting on toward dark by the time we got it back here." He slightly emphasized the pronoun.

Berry sighed profoundly. "Christ, I hate this place. We might as well've stayed on the ship."

"Bite your tongue," said Walls. "Yesterday, you couldn't get ashore fast enough."

"Yesterday, I just wanted to get away from the chief. Him and that new butthead jay-gee we got now."

McNiel took aim with an imaginary rifle of his own. "What do you need dinosaurs for, when fuzz-faced lieutenants infest the prehistoric world?"

Berry scowled. He had fine, curly blond hair atop a round, smooth face. It was almost a baby face, and the scowl made him look merely petulant rather than formidable. "That little bastard won't let up on the chief about that tool belt I lost over the side. So the chief won't let up on me. It ain't like I deliberately threw the damn thing overboard. Christ A'mighty, court-martial me for losing navy property, but stop *scolding* me like I was a little kid. You'd think it was the end of the world because a lousy tool belt fell overboard."

"Sounds to me," Walls said, "like the jay-gee's worried about the butterfly effect."

"The what?"

"It's one of the paradoxes everybody used to worry about." Walls raised himself on one elbow. "I thought they stopped giving the paradox lecture when they stopped making everybody wear those spacesuit-looking getups, but maybe young lieutenants still have to listen to it. Ah, God, those suits. Count us lucky, boys. Even after they stopped wearing the things, it used to be that if a guy so much as farted, he had to write it up in triplicate. Damage-assessment specialists'd carry on about how one poot was going to unbalance the whole Paleozoic ecosphere. Anyway,

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maybe the jay-gee just saw the same science fiction show I did. It was about this guy who travels to the dinosaur age and accidentally steps on a butterfly. The butterfly's an important link in a chain of events stretching across the eons. It's the ancestor of thousands of generations of butterflies that would've been food for animals that would've been food for other animals, et cetera. On and on, right up until it's our own distant ancestors who're going hungry and dying off before they're supposed to. When the guy gets back to his own time, everything's different. Because of that butterfly, that one little death millions of years earlier, history's been changed, Hitler won World War Two or became a painter or something. Maybe the South won the Civil War, I don't know."

"That'd sure settle your hash, Walls."

"Wouldn't it, though? So, let's say the jay-gee saw that show. Then he hears you've dropped your tool belt into the bay, and he thinks, Omigod, what if it brains the one fish that's going to give rise to amphibians and reptiles and *us*? He thinks, This dumb rating's maybe erased the dinosaurs and cavemen, Egypt and Rome, the Bible, everything."

Berry's scowl had deepened and his complexion had reddened as he listened, improving his resemblance to a cranky toddler. "Somebody oughta tell him the future already exists. It can't be changed."

"How do you know? Who says it can't be changed?"

"The scientists. Physics."

Walls laughed. "Now what the hell do *you* know about physics? For that matter, what do physicists know? They used to say time travel was impossible, and had the figures to prove it. Then they found a hole in time big enough to steer a ship through. Zap, and here we are, having the time of our lives four hundred million years before we're even born!"

"Well, notice," said Berry, "we *ain't* having to do it dressed up like spacemen. And I don't think the scientists worry much about killing something they shouldn't. They ain't been making pets out of the specimens they collect."

"Maybe," said Walls, "it's like the lottery. Only one ticket in ten million matters. The rest are just waste paper. The odds must be a trillion to one somebody's actually going to catch and cut up *the* animal that's the linchpin of our entire history."

McNiel scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "Maybe the animals that're part of your chain of events *can't* get killed before they're supposed to. Like, they *have* to survive."

"Sounds too much like predestination to me."

"I have got to remember every word of this," Berry said with fine sarcasm, "so the next time the chief gets after me, I can talk rings around him."

Nobody spoke again for several minutes. Berry stood glowering at the sea. Walls hummed. McNiel stretched out on his side and drank the last

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beer. When he had finished, he began tracing a pattern on the ground with his finger. He said, "This isn't even real dirt."

"What?" Berry looked wonderingly at him.

"This place—this time, it doesn't even have real dirt." McNiel took a pinch of grit between his fingertips, rolled it there for a moment, flicked it away. "It's just sand. No organic matter in it at all." He saw the look Berry was giving him. "I was just thinking, there's probably not more'n a ton of decent topsoil in the whole world right now."

"This is the age of mud and slime," Berry said, "and I can't *believe* I volunteered to come to it because I thought it'd be exciting."

"That does it." Walls sat up, stretched, and swung his legs over the edge of the slab. "If you're about to launch into a whole new cycle of grousing, I'm heading back. Coming, Mac?"

"I'm not sure I can get up from here."

After a while, however, they noticed that the tide was coming in and how the shadows had deepened and lengthened across the valley. It really was time to go. They lined up to send a final golden cascade onto the beach, then shouldered the coolers and began picking their way through a jumble of stony debris. It was not an especially hazardous or even an arduous trek unless one were burdened with a beer cooler or awash with the beer itself, or both. Finally, sweaty and winded, they paused to rest on a limestone shelf that formed the rim of a muddy basin. The basin drained into the marsh through a gap directly opposite the men; they had arrived at the edge of life's domain. The limestone lay atop a porous layer from which water seeped. A film of algae covered the damp rocks. Scum floated in shallow pools that had collected in the basin, and each pool bordered a dense, bristling mat of greenery barely an inch thick. A band of desiccated plant matter around the basin's sides showed where life had fatally overreached itself.

Berry suddenly cried out, "Hey!" and pointed at something on the ground before him. "Come look at this."

Walls and McNiel looked. Not far from Berry's foot, two millipedes writhed, entangled, on the detritus. It was hard to tell how long the creatures were or where one ended and the other began. They had purplish brown segmented bodies as big around as a man's thumb and scores of rippling orange legs.

"Prehistoric monsters going at it tooth and nail," Berry said grandly, "in a battle to the finish."

Walls shook his head. "No. They're making baby millipedes."

"First you're an expert on physics and now you know all about bugs. Where'd you get so educated, Walls?"

"Look at 'em. What else could they be doing?"

"Trying to kill and eat one another."

Walls shook his head again. "They're plant-eaters. That much I do

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know."

"You'd know it, too," McNiel told Berry, "if you weren't always jerking off in briefings."

"Get stuffed, Mac."

"Even the big ones are plant-eaters," said Walls. "Can you imagine a millipede as long as a cow?"

Berry snorted derisively. "You believe that stuff? You ever seen one that big? You, Mac?"

"No, but they say they're around."

Berry laughed outright at that. "Those scientists started that rumor just to keep us poor ignorant sailors from tracking up their precious swamp."

McNiel made a shushing sound. "It's kind of fascinating," he said in a low voice. "So that's what sex is. I almost forgot, it's been such a long time."

"What're you whispering for?"

"How'd you like someone yelling out commentary when *you're* having sex? I'm glad somebody around here's getting a little."

"Christ," Berry said, "even the goddamn bugs here have more fun than us." He reached down suddenly, scooped up a flat rock in his left hand, and held it menacingly over the oblivious millipedes.

"Hey," said Walls, "don't do that."

"Hell, Walls, they're only bugs."

"Just the same, don't."

"What's the matter, you scared of that butterfly effect?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I say it's a load of crap. Those scientists probably started killing and cutting up everything they could get their hands on the minute they came through the hole. Suits or no suits. They sure's hell started sometime. They've been doing it for years now, and it hasn't made a damn bit of difference in the twenty-first century. Not one damn bit."

Walls shrugged. "Not that we know of, anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Walls straightened and folded his arms across his chest. "Just a thought I had. What if—what if every time they kill a trilobite, or dig up some puny little plant, or scoop up another sample of plankton, they do change history? I mean, *every* time. For every single little premature death they cause here in the Silurian, the future becomes something other than what it was. And how would we ever *know?*"

"We'd go back," Berry said, "and see how different everything was."

"No. We'd go back, and everything would seem perfectly normal to us. We're from the future that's always being changed. We're inseparably part of it, so, if it changes, we change right along with it. Moment to moment, on and on. Who knows, the first people to come through the hole

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might not've been human beings at all. They might've been the intelligent descendants of—of raccoons, or squirrels, until something happened here in the Silurian that took raccoons and squirrels out of the running. Originally, there might not've been apes to give rise to human beings. Then something happened to change that. Or maybe the changes are a lot more subtle. Mac, instead of joining the navy, you suddenly find yourself farming back in Kansas."

"You're beginning to creep me out," McNiel said.

"Maybe," Walls said, "maybe I never meet a certain girl back in Houston, so I can't very well marry her, and she and I can't very well have a baby. Maybe I marry somebody else, or don't get married at all. Maybe I don't even get born." He smiled at Berry. "What could your life become if you drop that rock?"

"What an utter load of crap!" Berry said, but the hand holding the rock wavered.

"Go ahead and do it if you're going to."

"Aah." Berry lowered the rock. "This is stupid."

"Come on, Berry, let's go." McNiel gave him a comradely slap on the arm. I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I'm getting real hungry."

"Me, too," said Walls.

"Yeah. Me, too." Berry weighed the rock in his hand, then cast it aside. It clattered along the limestone shelf. They saw it go over the edge and heard it land wetly in the basin.

"Ah, God," Walls said in a hushed voice, "*now* you've done it!"

"What?"

Walls peered intently at Berry, drew back with a perplexed expression on his face, and looked significantly at McNiel. A frown slowly creased McNiel's forehead.

"Well?" Berry demanded. He looked from Walls to McNiel and back to Walls. There was the faintest note of unease in his voice when he spoke again. "What is it?"

They continued to stare at him for several seconds. Then Walls cleared his throat, grimacing as though it hurt to do so or as though he did not want to say what he was about to say, and solemnly asked, "Berry, weren't you a raccoon just a minute ago?"

For the space of a heartbeat the only sound was a gentle plash of water from below. Then Berry closed his mouth with an audible click of back teeth and lunged at his two shipmates as they retreated laughing across the shelf.

"You assholes! Assholes!"

"That look in your eyes," Walls gasped, "that quaver in your voice—"

All of them were still too full of beer for sustained running about. They collapsed onto the limestone. They caught their breath.

Berry glared hard and said, "Very funny. Ha, ha. Assholes."

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Walls grinned, looked around at the coolers, sighed. "We better get going. On the count of three, everybody. One. Two. Three."

Neither Berry nor McNiel moved, or even tried.

"But, fellows," Walls said, "we've still got—" he glanced at his watch "—forty hours and thirty-seven minutes of liberty left, and, ooh la—" he kissed his fingertips "—Stinktown by night!"

McNiel laughed. Berry tried not to laugh but laughed anyway. It was sharp, bitter, and short-lived, but it was laughter nonetheless. ●

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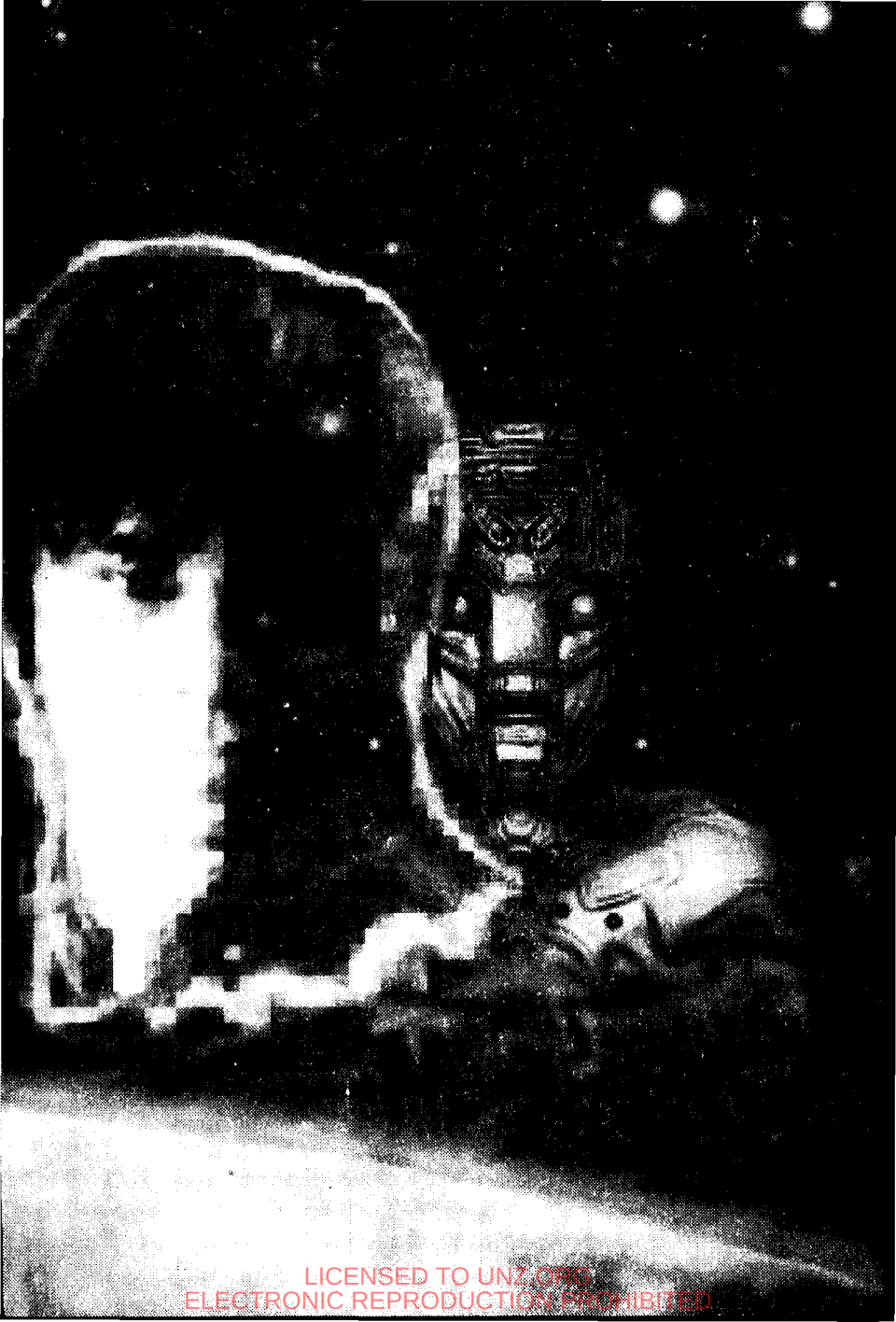

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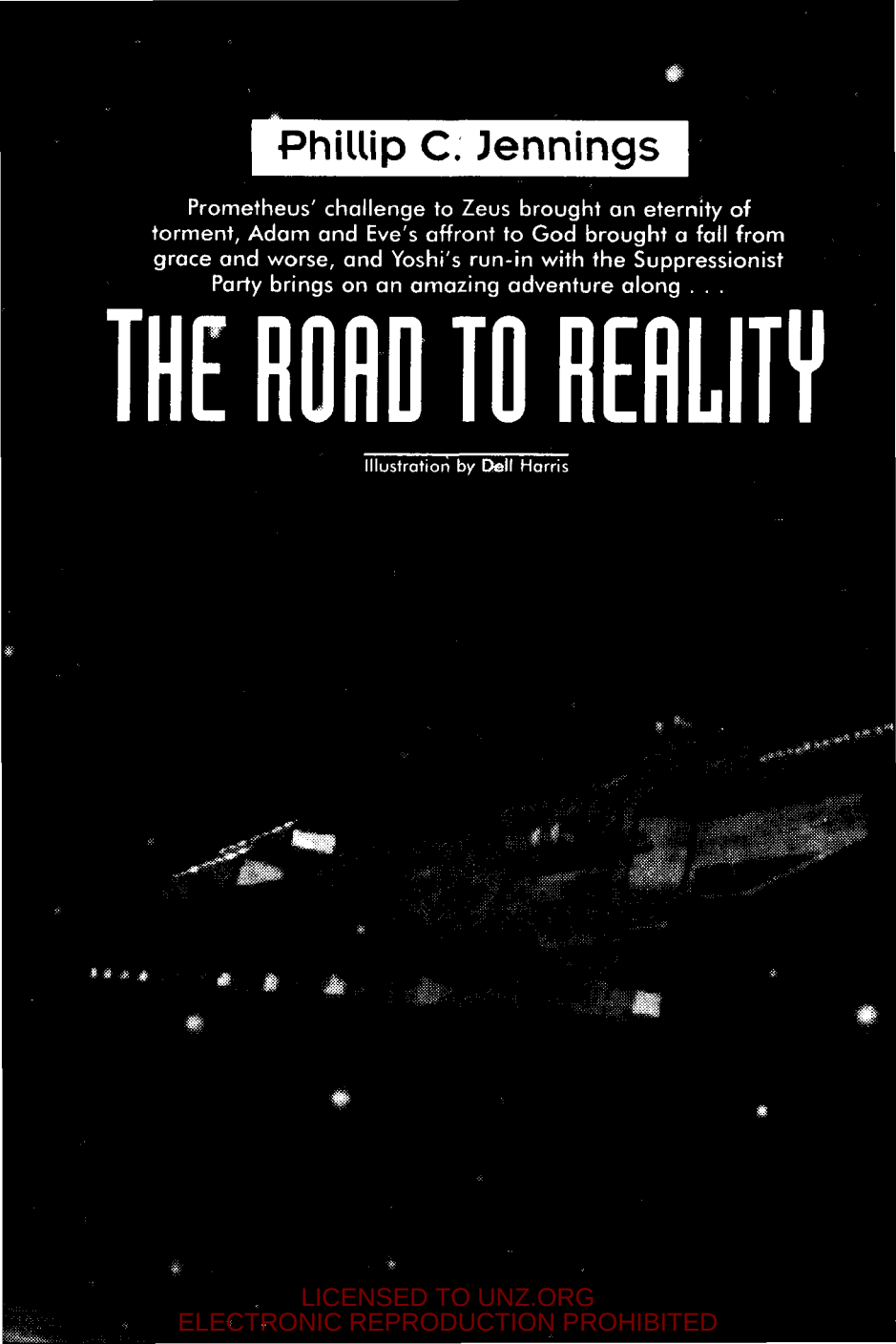
Phillip C. Jennings

Prometheus' challenge to Zeus brought an eternity of torment, Adam and Eve's affront to God brought a fall from grace and worse, and Yoshi's run-in with the Suppressionist Party brings on an amazing adventure along . . .

THE ROAD TO REALITY

Illustration by Dell Harris



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3111

I dropped bombs carefully for four Blue World years, shaking the earthquake potential from this weak place in the planet's crust, and sloshing the magma back and forth. My lake of lava coagulated at the crest of each bomb-tide, first along the interior rim, and then in the opposite direction, edging thirty kilometers of Region 62's seashore.

Two desolate ridges built higher with each swing of the bomb cycle. Chemical additives enhanced rapid hardening, and I achieved basaltic walls. Like the lip of a bowl, the south ridge tilted forward when seen from the ocean. It was very much a roof over the rough beach below.

I readied my *tour de force*. I altered the lava mix, aiming for a light, glassy obsidian. Then I precision-bombed my work-basin. The incandescent stuff sheeted seaward over the lava roof, splashing and dripping in curtains that cooled to the integrity of warm tar, chilled by unseasonable winds.

Some of my material froze before touching the water, hardening into a permanent cascade of stone. Regrettably, much did not, and slopped down to make a reef that steamed a few days into the poisonous air.

This was the best I hoped to achieve with "natural" materials. Along my rugged thirty-kilometer shore, six kilometers boasted a wall on the sea side, arching from high above the waves. Obsidian and basalt formed opposite flanks, enclosing a transitional space floored by igneous shrapnel, sand and tidewater.

I called it Yoshi Cathedral. It was finished, and I had been alone too long. I dusted off my social graces and enticed Lady Midori to come visit.

"It'll never last," she warned me, stopping in the shallows short of the entry. "It'll be centuries before people expand into Region 62. How can *that* be structurally sound?"

She raised a salamandrine arm and pointed at a particularly thin stretch of obsidian wall. "The first big storm, and it'll shatter."

"I think perhaps not," I said.

She seemed afraid to go inside. Perhaps I was daunting, standing ahead at twice the height of anything ever born human, in my battered, splattered carapace. She crouched into the water and let a big wave roll over her. Then she stood again. "Comrade Yoshi, have you been using chemical agents? Unnatural additives?"

I said nothing at first. Finally, I answered: "What kind of body is that?"

Midori smiled. "A one-day outdoor special. Oxygen from the electrical dissociation of water. When the batteries run out it'll be dead."

"Pretty damned artificial," I said.

"It'll leave bones. *You're* the one who complains about fossils and such things."

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I shook my robotic head. "Blue World will have no coherent fossil record. We can pretend to make it Earthlike, but not completely."

"Most of us think it's a worthwhile pretense. You feel otherwise. We know this, and we pray it's not—well, we pray—"

"I'm not insane," I said. "That label is flung too wildly. It's a Suppressionist insult." My voice softened. "Let's not argue about this."

Lady Midori persisted. "Can you remember a time when we *didn't* argue? Yoshi, you do grand things, as if this planet were just another virtual reality. That clouding of the line worries us. We survived a thousand-year trip from Earth by taking refuge in simulations, but so many of us got lost in fantasy. So many old friends! First you lose faith in existence, and then what's the point of existing?"

Midori ducked down to wet herself completely. Her present incarnation had a thrifty, cold-blooded metabolism, but even so her energies were running low. For the moment she was too fatigued to persist.

I waited for her bald, turd-colored head to bob up again. She gazed lidlessly at the glossy black shoreline I'd created, and I began a rant of my own. "Why is death fearsome? We were dead before we left Earth. Forty thousand dead souls stored in a computer. Ha! You talk of 'survival'! Our unearned second lives were a feast. The food was good, but most of us? Our appetites grew sated. It's natural. They *expected* attrition back on Earth. That's why they began with so many. They thought on a grand scale, you see."

I left the shore and waded closer, making it easier in case she needed to reduce her transmission strength. "We'll plant people on this world three hundred years from now," I continued. "People cooked out of the same vats that made the body you're wearing now. My formations will attract their descendants' attention. They'll calculate how unlikely it is that lava could act this way. They'll take samples and find chemical agents, and discover a clue to their origins. One can always hope."

She eyed me doubtfully. "Subversion. Perhaps it's my duty to turn you in. I should complain against you." Lady Midori's radio voice was a whisper.

"Come over to my side," I said. "The others want our new humans to start clean, Adams and Eves in the Garden of Eden, begetting children and grandchildren. We're supposed to hide among this naïve humanity. We're supposed to leave them ignorant and not play gods, because that would oppress them. It would give them a permanent inferiority complex."

"Yes! Let them develop *themselves!*" Lady Midori responded. "A new world! That's the idea."

"They'll invent gods. *Why not offer ourselves* in place of magic and superstition? It would be telling the truth. We're terraforming this world. At least, those of us who survived the trip. We have a lot to teach."

"We'll teach in our hidden identities," Lady Midori said. "We'll wear

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flesh, and risk mortality. It's a way to suppress ourselves. To make ourselves less dangerous, because we aren't so reliable, you know? Yes, certainly you know! All our friends who went insane—friends and lovers!—just because we few made it across the stars, can we say we're stable? The numbers are against us. Nine hundred souls left! Nine hundred souls out of forty thousand!"

I laugh rarely when talking politics. The stupidities that seemed funny ten years ago frighten me now. "This is a *sane* policy? To suppress the truth, and leak it out by hints and winks? There's no Santa Claus. There's no Santa Claus. All right, you're old enough to know. There *is* a Santa Claus. Ah, *now* you don't trust us!"

"They *shouldn't* trust us," Lady Midori said heatedly.

"Let's not make ourselves worse than we are," I answered. "Nor should we make *them* worse. Why raise generations of primitives? Why rerun ten thousand years of history? Can they do it? Can they move from bush life and campfires, and achieve a scientific world view on a world without a fossil record? No, let's give them all our technology."

"So they can die mad, like us?" Lady Midori objected. "So they can play sophisticated games, achieve sophisticated boredom, and commit sophisticated suicide?"

"No! Again, no! Hell! But I say this. If some personality zeroes out after eight hundred years, it's a private choice. Why should it terrify you into fake primitivism?"

This was no abstraction. We were talking about mutual, lives-long friends. Over the long trip some had gone to zero. Others exiled themselves inside labyrinths of virtual fantasy, so deeply solipsistic they'd lost any hope of contact. In their absence we called them insane. Thinking of them was painful for both of us. Lady Midori dropped her gaze. "We're talking in circles."

I was energized. I had a dozen points to make against the Suppressionist Party. As secret teachers it was their choice what truths *and what lies* to leak to our human charges, whereas my faction saw a better future: We saw ourselves living openly as terraforming intelligences from Old Earth, cycling through a choice of robotic incarnations, ready to deal with what our colonists requested on their own initiative. Empowering ourselves meant empowering them. But Midori had heard it all before. Why goad her?

I changed the subject. "I have something else to show you. It's in Region 19. A river that bridges over itself, loops around, and runs under. It was easier than this lava beach. Just a matter of digging a tunnel. On my new course it runs into a rain-shadow desert."

"More tricks!" Lady Midori sighed. "Give me a day to put together a Region 19 body. Are we done here? Already I feel unwell."

Our meeting had been a failure on both sides. Now it was over. "I'll put

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your body out of misery," I volunteered, from a reluctant sense of duty. I hated the way my political opponents used bodies of flesh, because—well, wouldn't it be true? If their vatlings had longer to live, wouldn't they develop souls of their own? And feelings? I'd never kill a frog, but now I had to sever the life from a thing compounded of frog and eel and human DNA. A thing with unrenewable batteries that would otherwise starve on a nearly lifeless world.

"Thank you." Lady Midori sank into a posture very like prayer. She radioed her soul back to Geosync Control. After a decent interval I pushed a hand through and snapped her spine just below the brain stem.

I carried the corpse to shore, parked my old, worn body in a safe place and radioed up to space, and then down again, to another robot habitus in Region 19. I waited by my spiral river through a rainy afternoon, trudging a raw, iron-rich landscape, dark weathered reds relieved by the brighter sheltered pink of my undercut tunnel.

The rain stopped. The skies took on the colors of sunset, lurid from Blue World's poisonous excesses of carbon dioxide. Lady Midori failed to come. Instead I received a summons.

"What do you mean, 'job review'?" I answered. "That's what I've been doing. I've been providing Lady Midori with views of the work I've done!"

Returning one last time to Geosync, I learned that I was expected to testify at my own trial. The Suppressionists were dominant, and my "courtroom" was as stark as they could make it. We were all computer entities, at least during our times off-planet, but *they* were computer entities who hated computer effects. In my default body-of-choice (1930s heroic worker off a Diego Garcia mural) I stood immersed in white directionless light. I was confronted by floating faces so simplified into caricature they might as well be name tags with voices.

It was all organized and procedural, even if nobody bothered to explain the procedure to me. Lord Hideyaki's face zoomed close and began to speak. "We have heard people like Comrade Yoshi. They are a minority. They do not like the policies of the majority. Using the model of the parliaments of Old Earth, they talk themselves up as a *loyal opposition*. The rules of loyal opposition are clear. Do not subvert the policies that the majority have voted to carry out. If you can't bring yourself to further those policies when it's your job to do so, then resign."

"It's my job to engineer the long-term liveability of Blue World," I responded. "To reduce geological instabilities, and bring water to places that might otherwise be deserts. I have done that job. I have succeeded."

Another face spoke up, pale and oval, with black lines for eyes, nose, and mouth. "You have created unnatural wonders. The vat-colonists will seek them out. Perhaps you intend to expose nearby veins of ore. Our vatlings will dig and uncover gold plates with writing on them, or some such trick."

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"There are no gold plates." I refrained from saying *thanks for the idea.*

The face pushed forward. "Lady Midori feels you have hidden intentions. You told her you favored a policy of planting clues."

"Did you mean to leave our colonists entirely clueless?" I responded. "What are they going to do without fossils? No, at some point this game of yours must have an end. These 'vatlings' are human beings. We're talking about bringing forth real people, and not dolls or children or computer fictoids. *They'll be more real than us.* That's the truth of it. When you realize this, Suppressionism must fade."

I held up my computer-generated hands as if to ward off these drifting faces, though for all their anger they were as unreadable as masks. "Your party will wane," I continued, "but now you think you can make me an example, and scare the opposition. Well, what's my punishment? The sane among us work on Blue World's surface. The insane pursue their dreams inside Geosync's computer. Are you going to vote me insane, or let me get on with my job?"

Lady Midori floated forward, while many faces retreated. "You may be insane, despite all your denials."

For a moment I was speechless. How dared she set such a precedent! Making this accusation once made it easier to do it again. The Suppressionists would soon feel free to purge everyone who disagreed with them. The days of toleration and open debate were over.

I mustered myself. "Midori, you pushed the idea that on Blue World there should be no size disparity between men and women. Women as big as men could not be physically dominated. I rallied people from my faction to your side. We radioed Earth for genetic updates. *This* is how you reward me!"

I'd have spared Midori nothing if I'd been allowed to continue. I'd have exposed her secret: Because the languages of Earth had evolved over a thousand years, they used scholars to interpret our requests. Perhaps they got things wrong. After ten point six years, plus processing time, plus another ten point six years in transition at the speed of light, Earth's latest update package was too full, too elaborate. It pretended to be what we asked for, but could mere size have so many consequences?

I'd have raised a dozen issues in my defense, but suddenly I couldn't speak. While my sanity was put to a vote, I continued under restraint.

The count was twenty-two to seven. Afterward, I went blank.

3115

I woke inside a cyberscape in Ready State Zero, flat green under cloudless blue. I was entirely alone. All the other nut-cases had used the centuries to make themselves scarce.

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I was furious. Who wouldn't be? I had a *duty* to be furious, a duty to myself and to my friends. The blank plasticity of my surroundings was like canvas to an artist, but though I was locked in, with nothing else to do but paint, I could create nothing until I quashed the emotions that burned too strongly inside me.

All it took was lots of time, lots of green and blue, and a single question. *What's the point?* What useful thing could I do here? What focus could draw me away from useless anger?

I made a decision. The purpose of my life became to rescue souls from hell.

Theologians say that hell is distance from God. A second hell is to be distanced so long from reality that you no longer believe it exists. Such distances are routine in virtuality. The sheer scale of my cybernetic environment was daunting. To find even one person among mad thousands, I'd have to explore complexities of size and game-logic beyond any metaphor. A rat-maze the size of Asia? Entirely new laws of physics?

No, thank you. There had to be easier ways than subjecting myself to tortures like these.

Why did I want to find my fellow inmates? Well, what else was there to do? Create my own fake universe? I'd done that a hundred times over on the long voyage between the stars. I'd done it, and kept sane—or maybe I *was* crazy. Maybe deep down I wanted to be here, and not out in reality. That's why I couldn't bring myself to kowtow to my political enemies.

Home sweet home for a thousand years. I'd forced them to return me here. What is reality? Why had I run away from it?

I have an answer to the first question, if not to the second. Reality organizes the world you're in. The reality of the Geosync computer organized thousands of incompatible cyberworlds, and placed them all under one ultimate set of laws.

For most people who believe in God, He's the one who organizes the true universe. He's the ultimate Computer—except the t[illegible] organized by the laws of physics, and that puts the old-fas[illegible] of business.

This is my confession: If I need God at all, I need a God [illegible] spontaneous grace that makes all organizing principles [illegible] and less confining. Perhaps the others trapped here were like me. They were oppressed because the computer worked flawlessly, giving them everything they wanted—except they wanted more.

I hoped so. For those who were happy in their virtual play I could do nothing. For true solipsists who'd lost faith in organizing principles like the computer, it was *freedom* that oppressed them, not *law*. They might be miserable, but I could do nothing for them either.

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I hoped there was a reachable minority. I'd never find them by hiking out from Ready State Zero. Instead I generated a hundred cubes and zoomed them into rectilinear shapes. I stuck them together to make a longhouse, and defined some rooms inside. I nominated opposite directions for south and north, using hot and cold colors.

I could have invoked directional light sources and theme music—something by Strauss or Demby—but I wanted the rules of electricity to apply, so now my job became complicated.

I grew a refrigerator-sized rectangle and designated it as the power source, something that glowed and hummed. I covered its exposed surfaces with outlets. In this early state of development, things I stuck together *stayed* together, and that was good enough for me. That's how *real* reality works too, at the micro level.

This "house" was the seed from which I'd grow a motherboard, complete with a processor identical to the computer in which we all lived. I'd program my virtual computer with the same software that ran in the real one.

Then I'd operate the damned thing, and learn its tricks. I'd search memory dumps to find where souls might be kept—souls who thought they were floating free. In truth they had storage addresses like everything else.

I'd cheat, and use those addresses to send back-door messages to ten thousand madmen and madwomen. Doing so, without playing their labyrinth games, would prove to them that they weren't alone.

I wasn't alone either. The Suppressionist purge continued. I heard the unmuffled engine of a two-seat roadster and looked out my longhouse's big south window. Comrade Kazumi whizzed by, cutting tire-marks in the featureless green. She made a second loop and then stopped. "Your doors aren't big enough."

"Reduce your scale by half," I suggested. "And for heaven's sake, tune your engine."

Comrade Kazumi shrank to bumper-car size. She drove her roadster-body into my kitchen. Her voice came out of the vehicle's radio. "You really blew it. The Suppressionists are in complete control. They use your name as a brand to taint others. What is it between you and Midori? You've given her everything, and now your political corpse to dance on. What made you do it? Some male-female thing?"

The suggestion made me laugh. "I was male a thousand years ago. I don't remember how it felt. It's all words, and I keep the words safe. I'll never forget them, but I can't conjure the colors or the emotions."

"The Suppressionists are ever so keen to have bodies again," Kazumi said. "Their long-ago lives must have been good ones. Maybe that's the difference between them and us. We were victims. We're victims now. It's a reversion to type."

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I could have asked Comrade Kazumi about her life on Earth, and told her my early history. That's what she wanted. I offered something close to that ultimate intimacy. "I was shy in the long past," I said. "I was shy among strangers. Very quiet until I learned to know people. Of course, after decades in space I befriended so many people among our dead that I didn't have to be shy anymore. So no one remembers that about me. But after years of solo work on Blue World, my shyness returned. It made me clumsy. I was abrupt with Lady Midori, and preachy."

"She's preachy enough on her own," Kazumi said.

"That made it worse," I agreed.

"Is this an apology?"

"Are others being exiled here?" I asked back. "Should I grovel now? Or wait and make it a mass event?"

Kazumi laughed. "I think you're very clever. You're cleverly doing something right now that I don't understand. Do you want help?"

"Yes. I want you to spawn cubes and run them out in linear patterns. Here's a map." I stepped around the counter and held it before her headlights.

"This looks like a memory chip. Like one of those logic circuits."

"It'll take lots of long-distance driving to measure these circuits and lay them out," I told her. "We're building a computer inside virtual reality, to emulate the real one in orbit around Blue World."

"Ah." Comrade Kazumi formed a thought bubble over her head. In the bubble she was female and wore a long golden dress. The kitchen was the same, and her mental Yoshi was identical with myself. She embraced me, gave me a kiss—and turned ameboid to swallow my body inside herself. A double-bulk Kazumi burped and winked. "Oops. Sometimes I can't restrain myself."

The bubble disappeared. The thought transaction was a way of saying she liked me, and also goodbye. It was a pause between events. In real life, people sleep and eat and run quick errands, and we've found the need to imitate these framing moments. But we're efficient about it. Now it was over, and Comrade Kazumi gunned out the door. She hadn't even asked *why* I wanted to build a virtual computer.

When he arrived, Comrade Basho was angrier than Kazumi, and more inquisitive. I explained my purposes. He grunted and stomped off in his sumo body, setting up camp to intercept the next series of exiles. Together they debated, and voted to help me build my computer.

"I'm told our semi-loyal opposition has a new leader," Basho said as they filed into my kitchen. "Comrade Haga is pliant. Perhaps he'll be effective. He'll soften the Suppressionists. They may back down and let us return from exile. Let's do nothing to aggravate Lady Midori or Lord Hideyaki."

"No secret plots? I assure you I'm being honest," I said. "Honesty has

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been my downfall, but in this case I hope it will see us through a hard time. All we want is to reach a few insane souls, a first step to bringing them back to reality. Statistics may favor us. One or two percent may want to abandon their madness. We'll be their saviors. That's twenty souls right there. Another twenty—another *hundred*, maybe—will respond to dialog."

Basho shrugged. "A harvest of souls. The Suppressionists won't like it if we seed this harvest with opposition ideas."

I laughed. "Perhaps they'll punish us. They'll exile us back to reality!"

"No, really—"

"We'll be ourselves, Basho. Otherwise we're prisoners twice over. Why are you afraid? You've always been courageous before."

Comrade Basho moved closer. He lowered his voice. "Geosync computer has to operate these next three centuries, until Blue World is ready for colonization. After that? Many functions can be transferred down to the sixty-four regional depots. The Suppressionists will take vat bodies, and live on the surface. Then what? What's the easiest way of dealing with us? Why, it's obvious! *Turn off the computer!* They hate it. They hate virtuality, and they don't trust us at all. It's not like murder. We'll be fully backed up, so there's no guilt involved."

He shuddered back. "We have to get free, out to reality, or we'll sleep in orbit forever."

I was amazed. "*Three hundred years,* Basho! In our mortal lives back on Old Earth, if we were told of a doom three hundred years away, we'd have counted it an unbelievable blessing to last that long! Many things can happen in three centuries. Many things *must* happen. People's concepts evolve."

"I'm with you," Basho said, holding out his hands against the flood of my words. "I'm with you. Let's try to reach the insane. Everyone will call that a good thing. Let's agree on that. If we have other issues, we'll talk them out later."

Basho and his companions got to work. New exiles arrived. In time there came to be forty of us. Before we reached that maximum, I called the gang together. "We need the best leader among us, as spokesperson to the Suppressionists if they come to check on us. Not me. I think that's obvious. My enemies call me Yoshi the Trickster. It's possible they believe their own lies."

"To them we're *all* villains," Basho grunted.

Comrade Haga agreed. He was our most recent arrival. "I may be the worst. All my compromises and soft words—they say I'm duplicitous and subtle. *You,* Comrade Yoshi! At least you were frank. You argued openly."

"Open argument was easy before Lady Midori made it a sin," I said. "Excluding you and me, who would be a good candidate?"

We chose Comrade Atsuko. She was a creative virtualist, always

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flaunting weird bodies and costumes, but her new responsibilities forced her to a minimal policy. We strove to look as we'd looked back on Earth, males male and females female, and we wore black unisex cassocks. If Comrade Kazumi couldn't abide being anything but a roadster—and she couldn't—then she should spend minimum time at headquarters. If Basho insisted on being sumo-sized, at least he should keep his acres of skin covered up. And so forth.

Atsuko issued press releases. A few Suppressionists read them. Perhaps they wished we hadn't organized ourselves around a new mission, but how could they object to our hopes to reach the insane?

They could have designated one of themselves to come keep an eye on us, but no Suppressionist was willing to take on that job full-time. Once or twice they sent visitors. Years passed. By visit number three, our virtual computer was almost ready.

I'd changed, not much, but a little. During these six years of imprisonment it became important to me that people should be described in their outward aspects, as we describe people in real life, with real bodies. After all, we held to the same features consistently, in accordance with Comrade Atsuko's rules.

Basho's pug nose fit well with his concept as a hearty peasant male, bluff and impatient with nonsense. He'd grown a spade beard to complement his sumo-wrestler's ponytail.

Haga's beaky, half-American features made him an internationalist. He was a bridge-builder who embodied genetic bridges within himself.

Atsuko's plucked eyebrows and bleached skin betrayed small vanities, precise and controlled.

I chose to look as I had before my immune system started to give out more than a thousand years ago; a narrow-boned male, tall and gangly, with large hands. Less the heroic worker I'd idealized before being exiled, and more the unheroic clerk.

When she showed up, Lady Midori wore a cassock like the rest of us, only green instead of black. She exhibited herself as a matronly woman with bad teeth, and walked energetically up to the long house, rolling her bulky hips. "This isn't correct Suppressionism," she told Atsuko within my hearing. "You show discipline, keeping to one shape only, but you cloud the line that separates you from reality. You use computer effects too well to imitate the real world."

"There is actually more discipline in our slavish imitation, than if we adopted floating face-icons," Atsuko amplified, with a cheerful nod. "But we're not foolish about it. I know how to use the Blend function to achieve cellulite, but with my legs covered, I don't bother."

"I've come to make proposals," Lady Midori said. "I see Comrade Yoshi over there, starting to program this fake computer. All this was your idea in the first place, eh, Yoshi?"

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I nodded curtly. This was the woman who had betrayed me. For six years she had made computer virtuality into a political dumping ground. Seeing her, I felt my hatred grow warm. What was she up to now?

She shook her head in reproof. "Have you taken an oath of silence?" she asked me.

"Comrade Atsuko is our spokesperson."

"But I like talking to *you*. Let me try something, and see how you react. We need more soil on Blue World. We need robots at work, grinding rock and rubble. It's a boring thankless job, but you'd be working in reality. I could parole the lot of you for a ten-year stint."

"I take it there's a price to pay," I said.

Midori smiled. "Lord Hideyaki is nervous about this computer. What else could be done with it? What is it you're not telling us?"

"There is nothing else," I said. "You've let us be. You've let us build the thing without much obvious oversight, and I suppose that means one of us is your spy. Do spies always tell the truth? This one is lying if he says I've got a secret plan."

"Still, that's the offer. I propose a vote among your group. You may work out in reality for ten years, but only if this whole construct is erased. Let the majority decide."

Lady Midori stood aside during our ensuing debate, but not so far that she didn't learn how deeply her offer divided us. Basho was desperate to escape virtuality. Kazumi was desperate to finish our work and contact the insane. We couldn't have it both ways. The majority voted with Basho.

Kazumi and I refused parole. "We'll get started rebuilding the computer," I said stubbornly. "Much will be done when you all come back."

"What if they make another offer?" Comrade Haga asked. He'd voted against Midori's offer, but now that we'd lost, he preferred to break rocks down on Blue World. He persisted. "What if ten years from now, they demand another sacrifice as the price for ten *more* years?"

"How many times can my heart break?" I said. "I don't know. Over and over, I guess. Over and over." That moment I made a silent resolution not to be Midori's victim. Kazumi and I would get the job done this next decade. We'd finish our damned computer, impossible though it seemed.

3121

Our comrades winked away in groups of two and three. Soon Kazumi and I were left to our own purposes, standing on flat green below flat blue. We set to work at once, to shape our computer by hand—a project forty souls had not quite achieved in six years. We were just two. After a

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second six years it became obvious we could never meet our ten-year deadline. In truth it had been obvious from the beginning, but I'd been driven by blind emotions.

I grew less blind. My morale collapsed. Comrade Kazumi found me sitting in my second longhouse's kitchen, staring hopelessly without focus. She drove close and parked beside me. After a while she spoke. "What we've done so far is accurate, right?"

I didn't answer.

"Point-for-point accurate. Suppose we weren't the first to conceive this project. Suppose some lost soul—not *purposefully* lost, or maybe she recovered her sanity—suppose a soul like that has used her ample time to finish the job and rescue others."

"Rescuing them to her lost place? What kind of rescue is that?" I scoffed.

Kazumi projected a thought-bubble. She spoke out of it, a woman in a yellow dress: "At least they'd be together. They'd be a society, relearning the lost arts of living with each other. We could find them and reconnect them with Ready State Zero. They'd be here next time Midori came. What a thing to throw at her! What a triumph!"

Kazumi proposed a systematic match. She invoked the Compare function, taking a small signature piece of our fractionally built computer, and running it against every non-preempted RAMstack address from zero-zero-zero, and then against every device address starting with the highly improbable A, and ending—without success—with device Q.

The job took half a year. We both sank into depression. After a time I roused myself. "It's a question of scale. How far can we downsize our signature device, and retain all its features?"

We shrank it to 22 percent, the absolute minimum, and ran another months-long Compare. Still no match, but this time Comrade Kazumi was not discouraged. "If our target's done the job it was made for and it's not in current use, it'll be zipped for storage. Let's use the Zip utility on our signature device, and try again."

The third time we found a matching address on device E. Our own stomping grounds!

Kazumi morphed from her roadster-shape and became a yellow-clad woman to give me a hug. "We could copy our target," she whispered, oozing happily all around me. "Now we've got it in our sights. We could copy everything that looks like zipped computer-emulation code!"

I agreed, trying to wiggle out of her sticky embrace. "That's what we have to do, to send messages. Just because a few souls may have found each other, doesn't mean their control-point addresses have moved. The rules are still the same. Only it's likely now we'll find a *society* out there in crazy-country. Not just hermits."

Kazumi's face grew ecstatic. She expanded in all directions and her bel-

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ly closed around me. I popped free to another part of the kitchen. "We've got work to do."

She sighed and shrank, but the smile returned to her face, and she nodded in cheerful agreement. Over the next several shifts we copied the target pseudo-computer, and ran Unzip to make it functional. It came already programmed. I composed a message and mailed it out to forty thousand addresses. Strictly speaking, only a fraction would be receptive at any single moment. The rest were paged out to make things easier on an overburdened system—the more elaborate and demanding their scenarios, the more chance they were on a back burner. Still, I was hoping for ten thousand contacts. Kazumi hung back nervously. "What will we hear? How many responses?"

We waited. She reverted to motor-car and buzzed laps around my longhouse. I busied myself building a swimming pool.

Time passed. How many responses? The answer was, just one. "You know what this means?" I theorized, fighting disappointment. "They've delegated a spokesperson. We'll visit him or her and it'll be a sort of embassy scenario."

Kazumi made a doubtful noise. "That's our best hope."

"You think it could mean something else? There's only one soul out there willing to talk to us?"

"There may have been—consolidations."

"Something forced?" I asked. "A dictatorship? Lacking a body, how can any soul enslave another? No, but I take your warning. This may not necessarily be the happy glorious moment we worked for, you and me twice over."

We invoked Transit. The message gave us a destination. In a moment of time we could never measure subjectively, we were elsewhere—in a room as vast as an aircraft hangar, girdered overhead by thin metal beams on x, y, and z coordinates.

The hangar was empty. A few worktables by the nearer wall were cluttered with things; a carpet shears, a box of instant noodle soup mix, and so forth. Given the proportions of this place, they scarcely counted. "Not much of an embassy," I whispered.

Kazumi leaned close, still a woman in yellow. "Consolidation can mean, I eat you. Suicide souls sometimes let others eat their memories. It's a way of keeping at least that much alive."

"Have you done this?"

"Twice," she admitted. "It was—wonderful. I felt like some oceanic soul-mother, moving in and adding color and life and value. I see in myself a monstrous desire for more. Not wanting to wait for my victim's suicide. A soul-eater might build a computer and send out invitations. All the more promising souls, the ones not lost in solipsism, they'd come and the monster would eat them."

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"You tried to eat me."

"Sheer coquetry," she said. "I controlled myself. I let you go, didn't I? On Earth a thousand years ago there were civilized forms of every sexual persuasion, and then there were rapes. I know the difference. But yes, I want you inside me. If ever you tire of yourself, you're welcome to become part of me."

What an offer! Moving to the tables was a polite way of increasing my distance. "Stereo earphones," I said, picking them up. "A teddy bear. An address book. This is an odd collection."

"Souvenirs of eaten lives," Kazumi suggested.

The hangar door slid open. Bright sunlight sliced inside, outlining a small, shadowy figure. "Hello! We welcome you. My name is Joto."

"This is Comrade Kazumi. I'm Yoshi." We exchanged bows and I continued: "Our interstellar mission reached Blue World orbit forty-four years ago. Out in reality, nine hundred souls are terraforming a world mostly covered by water. In three hundred years we'll have enough oxygen to support a human colony."

"Ah! The old dream." On closer approach Joto looked more and more like a Christmas elf. His small body was mostly arms and legs. He had big ears and a wizened face.

"We can lead you there," Kazumi said. "And then if the people in charge are satisfied, you can get bodies. Robot bodies, or bodies grown out of vats. I speak through you, of course, to the whole society that sent you to meet us." She put these last words almost as a question.

"Reality exists, and we may qualify?" Joto asked. "How do you know it's not another simulation?"

"When you're real, you know," I said. "When you're awake, you know the difference between wakefulness and dreaming. We have returned from reality, and we carry that conviction. We haven't been virtual long enough to doubt it."

Joto closed his eyes. He spent a moment in what seemed like prayer, and opened them again. "I shall ask three times; is this true? You have come to show us the way to reality? This is your serious purpose?"

"Yes, it's true," Kazumi said.

I amplified. "There will be a test of some sort, a test of sanity. A test of how open you are to the dominant policies of the terraformers, who call themselves Suppressionists."

Joto stepped back and quirked his head. "Are these policies repugnant?" Somehow he sensed my attitudes.

"A kinder word is inadequate," I said. "With time they must change. The Suppressionists want to plant Blue World with humans innocent of all Old Earth science and culture. They'll hunt and fish and multiply, and it'll be very pastoral and idyllic. But it *won't* be, of course. Life isn't like that, and they'll feel obliged to take steps. The more steps, the better.

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That's how I feel. Let's teach our humans openly and honestly, and not disguise ourselves when we wander among them."

"You make the Suppressionists sound naïve. If they were here, what would they say about you?"

I shrugged. "That I'm cunning. That I'm trying to poison your mind against them. That I long for a future where souls like ours take hero bodies and stride about Blue World, demanding honors as if we were gods. My appeal for 'openness' is just a first step, you see. In their view it's a ruse. We'll ultimately create a privileged class, and that's the object of all my scheming."

"We think this may be true, and what of it? The situation calls for the concentration of powers," Joto said.

"But also for the dissemination of knowledge," I said.

"Please. If you could move aside from those tables," Joto asked, making a fluttery gesture. "We have decided to take advantage of all you offer, but first you need to meet us in a less *packaged* form." He hurried past us and reached for the carpet shears.

On touching them, the shears vanished in a blossom of pixels. Now Joto had a companion. Sumi bowed and introduced herself. The process repeated with the address book, the box of dried soup mix, the blue comb, the leather belt, the jar of putty, the candlestick, et cetera. The hangar grew crowded with people. "Master Joto had the life-force to keep going in the midst of despair," Sumi explained. "He was the strongest. We surrendered our souls to his keeping, but each with a special key, so that if Joto ever discovered the way out to reality, we could become ourselves again."

"Otherwise, we might most of us be gone," another soul agreed. "Ah, so many suicides!"

"I'll lead you to what we've made of Ready State Zero," I said. "Then we'll send a message. Do you remember everything from our conversation with Master Joto? Do you understand about Suppressionism? It's those people I must get in touch with."

Joto strode forward. "We're ready. Everyone's accounted for."

I invoked Transit. It was like inviting a hundred strangers into my longhouse. Soon there was music. Spheres of Glass, Prokofiev, and Kitaro floating by like differently colored bubbles in the air. My flat green became a lawn. The urge to tamper is universal, especially in virtuality. To keep my guests busy while I shot messages to all the Suppressionist lords and ladies, I asked them to build me a fish pond.

The pond grew into an elaborate water-garden, with canals and grottos, trellises and topiary. Master Joto kept to my side, and we inspected it together, while waiting for someone on the outside to answer.

I told him stories about Lady Midori. "How does all this fit in?" Joto asked. "You're a political leader in exile. How do we serve your political purposes?"

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"Finding you kept me from boredom and futility," I told him. "But I think your people will serve my cause well. The Suppressionists hardly dare keep you all confined to virtuality. Not for long. If they did they'd make enemies among you, and some of their core support would falter."

"So you're optimistic we'll get bodies?"

"As fast as they can grow them, or build new robots," I said. "That serves me too. Out in reality you'll all witness that I'm not insane. Many of you may side with my faction in future debates. The way my supporters are treated will seem unfair, set against your own status."

"Some of us may not be very sane," Joto admitted. "We leaned on each other a special way. Think of a house of cards. Reality will heal us, or shock us further from health."

"I'd guess they'll screen each of you, and make a fairly honest job of it," I said.

"Let's speak frankly. You're hoping your enemies will blunder. You're describing how they *should* behave, but perhaps they—"

Joto's words were interrupted by a breach just ahead. Suppressionist face masks floated out of the brightness in two even rows, like a military procession. Lord Hideyaki and Lady Midori were in the lead. They tilted politely in response to our bows.

"You have succeeded. This is a great moment!" Lord Hideyaki said in his public speaking voice, as if he hadn't hindered my success by wiping out my first computer six years ago. *What a hypocrite!* "We welcome everyone. We shall remember this day as a Blue World holiday. The return of lost souls!"

Lady Midori took up the refrain. "Even now we're growing new vat bodies in Regions 14, 18, 32, and 37. We will begin interviews as soon as possible. Let's learn all we can about each other! Let's share our centuries! Comrades Yoshi and Kazumi, we have a reward for you. Nothing must delay it. First my apologies for a very wrong analysis of your mental conditions, but how fruitful your time here was! Now we'll show you how grateful we can be!"

I found myself unable to reply. Really unable, as I'd been unable to speak at my trial twelve years ago. Perhaps the Suppressionists thought I'd say something embarrassing.

It takes several minutes to radio a complete soul from Geosync down to the surface of Blue World, and those minutes must have passed. I never noticed. For me it was a sudden awakening. I rose and stepped away from Regional Depot 33, out into the morning sunshine. Tidewater crashed against the pylons below. After basking a while I went back inside, checked out the facility, and found it functional. The Fusion Cell hummed happily. ChemStores was so full that ChemOps was running its dig line at minimum speed. The vat was breeding nitrogen-fixing eukaryotes.

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Some time later, a second robot straightened away from the wall. "Comrade Kazumi?" I asked.

"Depot 33," she read from the sign on the door. "I know where Region 33 is. They've stuck us on a God-damned island. It's just a new prison."

"A pretty big prison. Region 33 is the size of the whole Japanese archipelago, welded into one piece." Despite these words it occurred to me that she might be right. I tried radioing a message to Comrade Haga, who was presumably breaking rocks into soil somewhere else on Blue World's surface. The message should have gone up to Geosync and down again, to its proper destination, no matter that I didn't know where he was.

No answer. Comrade Atsuko failed to respond, as did Comrade Basho.

Robots have no facial expressions, and very little body language. I was reduced to saying my feelings out loud: "Gloom. No, the hell with gloom. To hell with Lord Hideyaki and Lady Midori. Those two are starting to piss me off."

"They underestimated us. We're underestimating them. Do you know what radio isolation means?" Kazumi asked. "They're going to kill us. We'll suffer a 'regrettable accident.' "

I started thinking out loud. "The fusion cell seems to be working properly. Would they explode a whole regional depot just to get rid of us? That's wasteful."

"Do you doubt what I'm saying?" Kazumi asked.

"No. I'm trying to figure out how they'll do it. No explosions. No meteorites shot from space, because how do they know we'd stay in the target zone? Check your power supply. Batteries okay?"

"Yoshi, I don't know what to do," my comrade told me. She waved inland. "Our deaths lie waiting to ambush us. Perhaps out there. Perhaps they've laid minefields."

"Let's do different things. One of us should separate from this depot as if it were cursed, and try for distance. The other should stay put. Does this seem wise? We'll stay in radio contact, or else it's stupid. Perhaps it's stupid anyway. I feel we're being stampeded into action by our own fears."

"Be more flattering. Call it 'being decisive,' " she said.

"All right. I'll go," I spoke decisively. "I'll transmit a message every five minutes. I'll expect an answer. Silence at either end means disaster."

"Oh, Yoshi, if it gets you—Oh, I hate these bodies. There's no meaning to metal touching metal. As hugs go, this is pathetic."

"*Your* embraces have gone farther than I would have believed," I joked. "We've run the gamut of hugging."

"Except as human-to-human. It doesn't seem likely that we'll ever meet in the flesh. I regret that."

"Let's not give up hope," I said. "If I reach the opposite shore of this island, I'll turn back. We'll meet again and know that our Suppressionist

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enemies drew the line at murder. With time, we may all reconcile. Why not? The whole population of Blue World, adding in Joto's people, is yet barely a thousand souls. As many as that lived in my Osaka towerblock on Old Earth, and we were perfectly civil to each other. Why shouldn't a thousand souls live at peace in all these wide spaces?"

She began to answer, and faltered. The life went out of her. Everything faded to black.

3174

I hadn't felt such a sense of achievement in many years. Of course I let Comrade Kazumi hug me, and for that brief moment I even hugged her back. I woke from my great moment of happiness in what appeared to be an airplane hangar, crisscrossed overhead by metal beams on x, y, and z axes. It was empty, nothing on the tables by the walls except a big manila envelope. I opened it, and read the message: *Dear Comrade Yoshi,*

Let me explain. When the Suppressionists began radioing you down to Blue World from your longhouse in Ready State Zero, I sidled over to Joto and whispered that I feared for your life and mine.

He agreed to save us. I admitted I had a copy of your memories from when I hugged and swallowed you that one time—a stolen copy, because I'm that sort of thief, and that sort of pervert. That's why I normally keep myself as a roadster, to discourage my own vices. But we had no time for pretense. I have software designed for my perverted uses, and I ran it in reverse to deliver your memories into Joto's hands.

Joto? Joto? Who the hell was Joto? I remembered Kazumi's triumphant embrace—it was the last thing I remembered at all. So she'd stolen my memories! Now the woman knew everything about me. If she'd digested what she took, she knew all about my life on Old Earth; my frustrations, my jealousies, my disease, and how I'd been lied to by Dr. Kotobuko. How I came alive as an engrammed memory-set after my death. I made history by being the first disembodied soul to sue a medical practitioner. He'd given me *placebos,* damn it! I was dying of AIDS, and he'd put me into a *control group* to test how well his so-called miracle drug worked on *others!*

The courts found in favor of Dr. Kotobuko. I was rebuked as a nuisance. The whole business wasn't one of my proudest moments. Back on Earth, I'd not had many proud moments. I scratched my head. What was this business about the Suppressionists radioing us down to Blue World?

I read on.

Joto had his own special software, that allowed him to "package" and "unpackage" souls from his own conglomerate consciousness, by reat-

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taching their memories to a plex processor. You won't remember, but he did this in front of us, using all sorts of key objects that littered these now-empty tables. I asked him to use his skills to put you (and me) back together again, to resurrect us to virtual life, but only after a random number of years had passed, because it was possible I was being paranoid. Perhaps you and I were not destined to die down on Blue World. If not, I would act to prevent our duplicate souls from popping to life in virtuality.

I said "random," because anything unpredictable works against the Suppressionists, but I meant that you and I should awaken (if at all) at the same randomly chosen time, between eight and eighty years in the future. Joto didn't understand this. Obviously we were in a hurry, and I didn't make myself clear. So I came to life first, and it could be decades before you pop in. I'm in no hurry now, as I was during that minute with Joto, so I will explain all the events that have happened since you and I succeeding in finding that Zipped computer, and I gave you that big hug.

Comrade Kazumi went on to describe one of my life's prouder moments—a rescue of a hundred souls—a rescue I didn't remember in the least. I tried to glory in a deed that had obviously led to my death down on Blue World. *If you're alive to read this, as I'm alive to write it, you know that they killed us,* Comrade Kazumi wrote. *I won't forget that this has become that sort of battle. It's not political anymore, not for me. I mean to start my campaign by gathering information against our enemies. If I'm successful, you'll find much that you need to know in the other envelopes stacked on this table.*

There were no other envelopes. I didn't know when Comrade Kazumi popped back to life. It could have been yesterday. If so, the lack of envelopes meant nothing. More likely she'd been killed twice over. The Suppressionists were now warned of the possibility that I might come back to haunt them.

I checked the Geosync computer's clock-date. It was 3174. My glorious rescue of Joto and his conglomerate souls took place forty-eight years ago.

What now? Ready State Zero could easily be a trap. A *Suppressionist* trap, I thought at first, but then amended myself. It wasn't likely that more than one or two leading Suppressionists were guilty of murder. The vast majority would disown evils of such magnitude. The majority thought that Comrade Kazumi and I were dead because of some unfortunate accident.

Having seen us safely dead, Lord Hideyaki and Lady Midori would have turned us into saints, the better to accommodate former opponents. In her letter Kazumi spoke of a Blue World holiday, a once-a-year event at which we two were probably memorialized as Martyrs-to-a-Better Fu-

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ture. Praising dead enemies is the traditional first step in co-opting them, *as long as they don't come back to life.*

But Kazumi *had* come to life, and alarmed them about me. To put it plainly, I had a handful of enemies *very* interested in keeping me from harvesting the garden they'd planted. I knew this about them. What else did I know?

They'd be suspicious of any lost soul who turned up in Ready State Zero, hoping to get work down on Blue World's surface. They'd think he was me in disguise. They might kill him—separate his memories from his plex processor, and zero them out. I could unzip Joto's computer and contact all the crazy souls of cyberspace, hoping to create a flow of emigrants, but then I'd be as guilty of murder as my enemies.

Maybe not. I could explain the situation. *"The door out is a deadly one."* There's such a thing as third-party suicide, people who want to die, but can't do the deed themselves. Souls like that, worthless to themselves, were worth something to me. They might bring Lord Hideyaki or Lady Midori to a moral crisis.

Could I use other people that way, in my own behalf? Was this decent behavior? The principles I championed against the Suppressionists were those of full disclosure—tell the truth about human history, and let our vatling colonists choose freely what arts and sciences they wanted to learn.

Let them choose. That was the point. I could send a back-door message to all the lost souls of virtuality, being as thorough as possible—pages after pages with footnotes and appendices and exhibits, exploring all the pros and cons.

Not to do this was a sort of Suppressionism, wasn't it?

That thought was decisive.

I unzipped Joto's computer, and took weeks to compose an opus. I shot it out several times over. Among the thousand souls at work on Blue World, some might be in transit via the Geosync computer, parked here temporarily while relocating between depots. They'd have an address indistinguishable from any other—one of forty thousand control point locations. My long narrative would be carried down to reality when they finished their trips.

I'd fired my big guns, trying to get out the truth. Now what? From Kazumi's description it was obvious that I was inhabiting Joto's virtual reality. If Joto was still alive, Lady Midori could demand to know where that was. I had to assume the worst—she knew how to consume me or zero me out, and Joto was willing to help her. It wasn't that I didn't have faith in this "Joto" character. It just seemed prudent to hop out of here, to some private universe of my own construction, one of the many I'd made during our thousand year voyage across interstellar space.

I duped a personal copy of Joto's extremely useful computer. Then I

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was on my way. If Lady Midori wanted to make peace, she could use the first duplicate, the one Comrade Kazumi and I left in Ready State Zero, to send me a message. To make sure I got her offer, all she needed to do was mail it several times over to forty thousand backdoor addresses.

3175

A year went by without any word from Hideyaki or Midori—without any contacts from Suppressionist reality. The circumstances should have bothered me, but my new life was busy and adventurous, with peculiar aspects. Universes evolve, yes, but bouncing through my repertoire, I'd found one that was *way* different. These last centuries someone had wandered in and taken over one of my old fantasies, and warped it to his or her purposes. Someone had left her mark.

If Comrade Kazumi were alive, and wanted me to find her, she'd locate to one of my places. She had my memories, and she knew the addresses. I hoped to find her. I hoped to find *anybody*. Other souls were important to me. This fact drew me in, although truth to tell, Chyle wasn't a scenario that encouraged thoughts of importance. It was a place of tricks and funny names, where I played a role noticeably smaller than the person I really was; feasting, fighting, and making love to amenable fictoids.

Back in Osaka before my graphics design career took off, I abandoned my ambitions every day for six hours as a short-order cook. To the staff at the restaurant I *was* a cook, not someone with an impressive artistic résumé. This was like that. To keep from being hunted down by the Suppressionists, I parked my ambitious self to play a game whose only sure virtue was that it kept me busy and in hiding. To the fictoids of the game I was Dridley the Mirthwadite, freelance adventurer.

This was hardly a seductive role, yet toward the end of this year I was more Dridley than Yoshi. You don't have to guzzle to become an alcoholic. You can do it by sipping discreetly, if at every turn you find it easier to continue than to stop. Dridley was easy for me, like a cardboard part for a great actor. Had I meant to rescue souls from deep-game madness? At the end of my year I was perilously near needing rescue myself.

On my latest mission I drew near a corridor lit by distant torches. I froze and listened, hoping that stealth made me invisible, for anyone who saw my exaggerated movements would find them comical. Fifty weeks ago I'd been assigned the body of a heavy-bellied gourmand, but a man who would eat is obliged to take risks.

I'd tracked down the slave-gang I'd been hired to free. I heard the rattling of chains. Laughter echoed through white-webbed passages as Rakni's mercenaries boasted of the infamies they'd performed last night.

Rakni was one goddess among many, few of them pleasant. I reviewed

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her acts of wickedness, aggravating myself to a frenzy of zeal. Most of the time I muddled along like an actor reading his lines, but the deed I meant to do required a bravo spirit. It wasn't enough to hide in the vaults below Rakni's Temple, footing among skulls and casks. To prove worth my hire I had to liberate two dozen people.

The guards posted a sentry. The others began to satisfy their lusts. Stepping back from the corner, I unbuttoned my breeks and hosed the floor. The slope of the pavement assured that a stream would trickle into view.

A minute passed. The guard walked up the passage and turned. I stepped from a doorway to throttle him.

He made a racket. I drew my wand and gave him a tingle. He collapsed in hysterical laughter. Two other mercenaries puffed round the corner.

I backed down the corridor, waving my weapon. I heard jangling as the shackled slaves came into sight. They pressed on Rakni's henchmen. One turned to ward them off. I attacked the other, scoring against his bare torso. His thrust wasted itself in a pyrotechnic discharge, because beneath my gravy-stained jerkin I wore a chain mail shirt. Now two enemies rolled about the floor, laughing helplessly. Soon the third one joined them.

WAAAAAH! The loud honk announced the daily Peace. I'd barely freed the slaves in time. Among them was a very pregnant friend I'd met—well, what a coincidence!—almost nine months ago. Item A joined me with enthusiasm. We wheezed up three flights of stairs and exited into Rakni's outer court. The goddess's red-robed priests stepped forward. "Are you Dridley?" one asked as he readied a clipboard.

I squinted against the brightness of a gold and purple sunset. "Dridley the Mirthwadite. Minutes ago I freed the slaves sold you by Magister Gasselot. Your three mercenaries will acknowledge—"

"Are they alive?"

My beard concealed a smug smile. "Tingled and disarmed."

"But you'd not led your charges out," the priest objected. "You might have had some difficulty."

"If you want the House of Gods to judge, I'll tell them that nobody but you prevented a score of desperate men and women from reaching the plaza, and you all sworn to passivity. If we return to quid pro quo after the Peace and fresh guards run out to stop us, the priests of Mirthwad will cry foul."

The man in red gritted his teeth. "We can't submit every transaction to the House of Gods. Very well, I won't contest your claim."

From across the court a red-robed woman strode forward. "Dridley, your name is marked. Stay out of the dark alleys of Chyle. That big gut makes an easy target."

I laughed. "A month from now the gods will shift alliances. Mirthwad and Rakni will be friends again. I've seen it happen before."

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Item A plucked at my sleeve. "Come," she urged. "I don't like these scenes. All those stairs! I need to sit and rest."

"How do you feel?"

The rings under her eyes gave me concern. Her hair was unkempt. She was too tired to keep up appearances. Across the cobbled plaza from the Temple of Rakni stood a small bistro. "How about some soup and bread before we report in?" I asked.

Item A ate a third of her supper with ravenous appetite. She shoved the rest away. "I'll be hungry in an hour," she complained. "The baby monopolizes my belly. I've no room left for food."

"We can wait."

"I say that a lot nowadays," Item A answered. "I've skipped worship since falling into Gasselot's hands. If Mirthwad's temple were in the center of Chyle I'd go there, but it's hard to cross the city."

I shrugged. "Since defeating Elsewad, Mirthwad rules the Gund, but here in Chyle we're relegated to the low-rent suburbs."

At the mention of Elsewad's name Item A shivered. "Dridley, this Rakni thing is a skirmish. Elsewad is different. Bad enough you worship the god who led the Hag Queen's army across the Latpans, but Elsewad's priests hate you for stealing the secret of the torque."

"The Conventicles forbid sacerdotal violence. Elsewad would have to hire an assassin."

Item A shook her head. "Elsewad has money, and you've just freed twenty-odd slaves. They'll peddle their services to the highest bidder."

I studied my empty wineglass. "That's life."

Item A brushed crumbs from her tunic. "I don't want to worship tonight. Can we just sit here?"

Twilight crowds ambled, listened to proselytes and plotted mischief. "When the Peace ends this place won't be safe."

Item A picked up her spoon and sipped her soup. "I have disturbing thoughts," she confessed.

"No wonder, if you've been skipping worship."

"Dridley, does it occur to you that all this—" She waved an arm made plump by the changes to her figure. "Think of Chyle, of the villages along the Gund, of the wildmen of the Aglan Albabs. It doesn't work. We're all supposed to be part of an economy, a system with farmers at the base, and the gods on top."

I'd first met Item A while the hierophants of her god Techto, each bribed by a different guild of realtors, debated the course of next year's lava flow. I was accustomed to teaching her the ways of Mirthwad, a god whose doctrines I'd adopted as protective cover.

"Yours is exactly the kind of speculation Mirthwad means to stamp out," I lectured. "Profundities are made of words, and words of meanings. Each 'connotatus' is a building block, but rarely do these blocks

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combine according to logic. Mirthwad's gift is forgetfulness. We remember names and facts, but abandon economics, politics and other false constructions."

Item A ignored me. "Under the helmet you go. Out you come, purged. Elsewad uses a helmet too. They all do. All the gods."

I waggled a finger. "Elsewad's helmets burden the mind with lost languages and useless history."

She kicked me under the table. "Stop your preaching! I know the doctrines of Mirthwad, Elsewad, and Techto, and several others besides. Words, mere words. They're different, but all end with you under the helmet.

"Life doesn't have to be this way," she continued. "There's a voice in me. The more I skip worship, the more it tells me we're in a madhouse. The gods are laughing at us, Dridley. They know something we can't see, something the helmets keep us from seeing."

What was I hearing from Item A? Was it possible that computer fictoids yearned beyond their roles? Could they play effectively if they knew they were part of a game? Or was Item A more than a fictoid? I was curious to find out, but she responded blankly when I whispered *"Kazumi?"*—as blankly as anyone else in Chyle.

Since I was supposed to be a pious fellow, I leaned forward and took her hand. "Item A, you can't neglect worship night after night! Must I force you to come, or will you walk at my side and retain your dignity?"

She stood. We paid our bill and left for the suburbs a few blocks beyond the city wall. We reached the park by the Great Library. She clutched herself. "A contraction!"

"Have your membranes ruptured?"

She gave me a sharp look. "Set me by those bushes. Send for the priests."

Item A's child would make a fine gift for the priests of Mirthwad. I eased her into her resting place and ran down Buttermarket Street toward the temple of my favorite deity.

I returned leading a file of priests and palanquin bearers. Item A was gone. "She fooled me!" I said.

"Why?" asked the puffing hierophant at my side.

A woman who refused to worship was an atheist. If I spoke the truth all Chyle would have hunted her down. I couldn't unleash persecution on Item A. "She slipped off. She preferred to be delivered by the priests of Techto."

The priest frowned. "The Peace will be over in another hour. Come with us. Enjoy the blessings of forgetfulness."

"My place is at her side. I'll come tomorrow." Bowing politely, I turned and walked for Techto's temple, slowing to a halt when my priest and his followers were out of sight.

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Time to think. Item A was lost. Worse, I'd become an enemy. She'd seek refuge where I didn't dare follow.

Really? During the Peace I'd dare anything, even the temple of Elsewad. No, if she wanted to hide she'd go to a place repugnant to my creed. The answer was nearby. She'd entered the very source of ideologies, systems, and hypotheses; the Great Library.

I studied the heavily buttressed building. Lights glowed inside. The Library's visiting hours were co-terminous with the Peace. I grimaced while treading its converging paths. How could I rationalize actually going in?

Well, as a good Mirthwadite, wasn't I allowed to pollute my mind, as long as I purged it?

I entered the Library, and wandered the aisles until the novelty wore off. I found Item A bent over a display case in the Map Room. She turned, saw me and smiled. "Look!" she exclaimed.

Item A had forgiven me, as if I hadn't tried to force her to worship. It was only fair that I reciprocate, as if she hadn't pretended to go into labor. I drew up to the table. "What's that?" I asked.

"A map of the world. A very old map."

"The world seems shaped like a wineskin," I said, fingering my beard.

"I see a pot with a thick handle where the Gund flows into the Latpans. This line marks the caravan route from Chyle. West and north of the Dying Sea lie the hills of the Aglan Albabs, where the Hag Queen rules. Now look at this! Another dotted line, running from Chyle to Quarry Mountain, then through the middle west, and off into the unknown!"

"I see."

"Where does it go? What lies beyond the map? Why shouldn't there be more mountains, more rivers? All this blank parchment!"

I was so lost to the game that I responded like any pious citizen. "Just because the parchment doesn't conform to the outline of the world, you think something lies beyond. What a fallacy!"

"Dridley, come with me. We'll follow that mysterious trail. The experience will open your eyes."

"You can't travel in your condition."

Item A bit her lip. "I'll buy your cooperation. If you accompany me I'll consign my baby to Mirthwad. We'll hold our departure until I've recovered from childbirth and found a wet-nurse."

"What about worship in the meantime?"

She shook her head. "Swear you won't force me into devotion."

I made a promise. "Item A, you've changed. I need to understand what's troubling you. I've been thinking. I too should refrain from worship. I'll make myself a bridge between the world and your fevered state of mind."

Item A delivered a baby girl a week later. The priests of Mirthwad

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were delighted to accept our child, though Item A embarrassed everyone by weeping during the ritual.

It had nothing to do with loyalties to Techto. It just seemed wrong to hand over her baby, she explained, assailing a time-honored custom in that sweeping way she had. I hustled her out of the temple as quickly as possible. Her ideas weren't for public consumption. They were disturbing and provocative.

During the next month neither Item A nor I performed our devotions. My behavior grew erratic. In my adventures I used reason where others tried force. Clients no longer wanted to work with me. By the time we left I was poor, and glad to see the walls of Chyle behind us.

We strode through a fringe of farms, orchards and sheep-commons. "We're supposed to believe these fields feed all Chyle," Item A said. "How many priests, and how few peasants!"

A wagon wheeled by us. The teamster was on his way to Quarry Mountain after delivering a load of durium slabs. He offered us a ride. We turned him down, to revel in the luxury of free speech.

The driver flicked his reins and drew off. Item A spoke. "This year twelve babies were born. Last year the count was six. In all the world ten women are pregnant. This is typical. Perhaps a thousand children born in any century."

I agreed. She continued. "Yet your memory tells you you're twenty-nine years old. I think I'm thirty. Everyone we know places his or her birth less than five decades ago. Either our statistics are wrong or our memories lie. What keeps us from realizing these things?"

"Everything we know is unreal." Who was I talking to? A fictoid? A real soul, just playing a game? Or a soul who genuinely didn't know who she was? The helmets of the gods shouldn't work to full effect on true souls. *I'd* used them, and I still knew who I was.

Did I? *Comrade Yoshi.* My name creaked out slowly. The sound of it wavered in my mind. Blue World seemed like a dream. I rehearsed the names of people I should have loved and hated. After just one year of middleweight gaming my emotions felt smothered. One wasted year, and I'd have to learn to love and hate all over again.

At least I knew my identity. How many years would it take before the power of the game, or the power of the helmets, took that away from me? I'd be like Item A, and perhaps not courageous enough, or iconoclastic enough, to undertake a voyage of personal discovery.

"We're like sheep and the gods are our shepherds," Item A said. "Now we've resolved to leap over the fence that surrounds our field. What will we find?"

Next day we reached Quarry Mountain, a heaping black bulk, girdled by a string of flower-garden villas, inns, temples and quarry operations. Item A had been a child here, but her memories of childhood were grow-

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ing dubious. We shuddered away from the hospitality of her priests, and trudged down the road until it became a cobbled trail.

We continued three days through gently rolling grassland. "We're halfway to the edge of the world," Item A remarked as we massaged each other's feet by that evening's campfire.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Perhaps it's just that I don't like the name 'Item A.' As the hours go by odd sounds repeat inside my head: 'Kaiko Ieyamatsu. Kaiko Ieyamatsu.' A veil is lifting, but what lies behind is as vague as dreams. I was proud once, maybe a god myself."

I nodded. "Kaiko?" I said.

"Yes, Dridley."

"My name isn't Dridley. Call me Yoshi." I felt ashamed for waiting so long. What kind of ethics were these? Who convinced me it was right to deny myself, and wrong to betray the game?

We spread our blankets, slept, ate, and broke camp. We trekked on for three more days. The Aglan Albabs lay to our right, a high forest country starkly unlike the bleak salt pans to our left. We'd have been entertained were these landscapes visible, but both regions lay beyond sight. Beneath fast-moving clouds we wandered a wide margin of wind-shaken grasses.

As we walked, we exchanged revelations. My companion faltered out bits of Japanese. "We were gods once!" she exclaimed. "But we were bad gods, yes? And now they—"

"Who?"

She shook her head. We toiled on, cresting a long, slow rise of land. Kaiko claimed to see a black margin along the horizon. "It's the edge of the world," she said.

"Do we go on, or turn back?" I asked. "They may punish us for trespassing."

"You say too many words in the language of recent dreams. *Nihongo ga hanaseru yo ni naru made hansanai de!*"

We descended from the crest. The margin disappeared. We climbed, descended, climbed, descended. After leagues of hiking our goal seemed no nearer. Then we topped the latest hill and saw a colonnaded roof in the near distance, rising from a mound fringed by sloughs. Beneath its shade bubbled a fountain. The road took us to the place, crossing reedy waters over a bridge of durium blocks.

We drank, slipped off our shoes, and bathed our feet. To an infinitesimal degree the hall darkened. I looked up. Metal rods clicked into place in the ceiling. We were trapped.

"This way, sir and madam."

The fountain sprayed a fine mist. In that mist appeared a glowing face. "Come, come. Don't stare," the image spoke. "I hope to provoke a reaction."

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The speaker's comments were in Japanese. "What is this place?" I replied in the same language.

"Hmm! You must be awake to yourself. Awake enough to remember other games, and other centuries?"

The face turned to scan the grasslands around us. It rotated a full cycle, back into view. "For lifetimes this place has been a monument to power. All the gods start from this font. Recently I approved the deification of young Mirthwad and sent him to the Hag Queen for training. Mirthwad has achieved great things, I understand."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Mirthwad asked that question," the voice responded. "I gave him the choice. He could accept godhood or have his answer. He chose godhood."

The image's eyes focused on me. "Yoshi, you're a very good adventurer. If anyone deserves to be deified, it's you. Unfortunately I can't oblige without your cooperation. The rules of this game stipulate that the gods of Chyle be ignorant of who they are."

"How many of them are real souls, and not fictoids? How many got a long message months ago—in a language they didn't know, and in an indecipherable script?"

"I don't know. In the language of your offensive dichotomies I'm not 'real' myself," the face admitted. "I'm limited in my functions."

"There's no way to summon them all here? No way to wake them out of the game?"

"Those who chose to wake may do so. Kaiko has chosen, and here she is. Do you value yourself, Kaiko?" the image asked. "If not, no need for suicide. I can take you away from your past, and make you a goddess."

"The long trip is over," I told Kaiko. "Our starship is in geosynchronous orbit around Blue World. The planet is being terraformed. Many souls have left virtuality. They're incarnated in robot bodies, or bodies made of vat-grown flesh."

"If you're telling me the prospectus for a different game, it's in bad taste," Kaiko said. "You're making a mockery of something I once lived for. An old, old hope."

"Check the year. Our ship was to have arrived at Epsilon Eridani in 3083."

"I—I have forgotten my powers. How to know the time. Let's see. 3175. My God, such a number!" She choked with emotion. After a time she whispered: "I've grown centuries older, and not even as myself! As somebody of no consequence whatever!"

I turned to the image. "I'd like to add to your programmed menu. I want you to inform anyone who comes that there's a way out of virtuality, but a *dangerous* way. Those who take it may be interrogated, or blocked, or even killed. I don't know if I'm exaggerating to say this. I'm a poor candidate to scout out the situation, since I'm the one Lady Midori and Lord Hideyaki want to get rid of."

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I gave a fuller explanation. Kaiko shook her head. "You say that Comrade Kazumi is dead."

"That's how I account for things."

"Did you love her?" Kaiko asked.

"I think she loved me." I thought a bit and elaborated: "But not exclusively. Our bond was like—like soldiers in war, who would do almost anything for each other."

"And the silence since you shot out your big message? How do you account for that?"

"Your ears were deaf at the time. Deaf to Japanese. I suppose many deep gamers are deaf by choice. I'm surprised, though, that Lady Midori hasn't broadcast a response. Perhaps her silence is calculated. *Anything* she said would give me more information than I have now, and she'd rather have me ignorant."

Kaiko made a decision. "Yoshi, let's ruin this game. Let's interrupt it, and collect all the souls at play. Tell them what you've just told me. Let's go out and ruin *other* games, and rescue all those deep gamers."

"And then what?"

"*You* know, don't you? *You* know what you'll have to do. But I wouldn't have you do it just for me."

"Do you remember how to invoke Transit?" I asked. "We're imprisoned here. We need to go elsewhere to gather our powers."

A day later, two caped superheroes flew into the skies over the city of Chyle. We pealed away slabs of durium, four-by-eight meters each, from the roofs of various temples. Sirens honked, announcing the daily Peace, but the Purple Crusader—myself, clad in comic-book swirls and glitter—kept working in defiance of all the gods. I grabbed as many helmets as I could find, and dumped them in the high hills behind the eastern suburbs.

Priests shook their fists at Kaiko—the Laughing Dynamo—as she did likewise. A horrid stench rolled in from the west, where Quarry Mountain erupted off schedule. The clerics of Chyle clambered into the heights to escape the low brown smell, and here again they threatened us with divine retribution.

The Laughing Dynamo had taken special pains to deal with Quarry Mountain. Volumes of fecal matter rolled from the heights, enveloping villas and palaces, and most especially the temple of Techto. Refugees jogged away, holding hankies to their stricken faces.

How vulgar. It would have been more elegant to ruin the game by substituting helmets of our own manufacture, sneaking in and out of three score temples, but Kaiko and I despaired of figuring out how the damned things worked quickly enough to make the necessary changes. The guts of a *real* helmet lay open to view by anyone with a screwdriver, but the

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working parts of a virtual helmet are simply compiled code, all zeros and ones.

Somewhere in Chyle lived a soul who would eventually remember him- or herself, as the person who'd taken over my five-hundred-year-old scenario, and added helmets to the equation. I hoped that was true, and I hoped I could be persuasive enough to enlist that person's talents. Kazumi's ability to copy memories into her own soul—Joto's ability to restore memories to independent life—and now this! A gradual process of selective memory suppression, and the substitution of lies for truth!

Software was all, but I was becoming the repeated victim of a special category I called *soul*ware. As this stuff propagated, life for the inhabitants of virtuality was becoming unrecognizable. The boundaries of self-definition were flouted. Emigration to Blue World seemed ever more necessary.

Kaiko and I finished our destructive work. We flew back into the hills, and transported our helmet-booty further away, working in shifts. Meanwhile, in the city of Chyle, riots broke out, and factions collected. Refugees crowded the roads southward, seeking to reach the Gund.

We arranged for a nightfall of manna to feed them. The gods, who loved anonymity at the best of times, were in low profile and low repute. They were unable to stop us from flying where we liked. We made grand speeches from the air.

Our words made little sense to minds fuddled by recent worship. We were just planting seeds. Days were yet to go by before those seed-concepts germinated. By my calculations true souls were a minority. Only that minority would change as Item A had changed, at last remembering their real names and histories.

Days *did* go by. The passage of time proved my calculations wrong by a factor of ten. I had guessed as many as a dozen souls lived in this particular fantasy world. The fact was, *forty* had migrated here, but that wasn't where I'd made my big error.

My mistake was in not recognizing the consequences of pregnancy. Here was another instance of new soulware at work, making it possible for two once-dead emigrants from Old Earth to create a third thing of merged memories—merged, but always *suppressed,* until now. Over five centuries, forty lost souls had produced four hundred "children."

If virtuality had a government, soulware like this would be contraband. How could I claim an identity worthy of respect, when I could be variously alive or dead, or complete in myself, or part of somebody else?

When the realities of Yoshi Yasoda and Kaiko Ieyamatsu were added together, did they amount to something *less* real? Our daughter hardly thought so. Ayano grew prematurely to toddlerhood so she could speak, and confirmed that half of her came out of me by describing my futile court case against Dr. Kotobuko, a thousand years ago.

Ayano was me, and yet not-me. I looked back on a recent career of defi-

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ance and death and defiance again, with a new death looming. I decided I must be a little suicidal. I had a touch of the thousand-year-old disease. This hardly described Ayano. She had a younger spirit, more affirming than mine.

Ayano agreed. "Comrade Kazumi is the same way. Or *was*, anyhow. The roaring roadster! She's another conglomeration of souls, though she kept her nature hidden."

"Conglomeration!" Ayano liked big words. They were startling, coming from a kid her size.

"This business of merging souls might be a good thing," I answered, though my heart still quailed against it.

Motivated by a sense of sisterhood, Ayano resolved to enter *other* games, and find Comrade Kazumi, if Kazumi were anywhere to be found. My daughter's pledge freed me to take up a less personal cause. I gave Kaiko a final kiss, and invoked Transit. I came *here*, to a place of my choosing, and my next hop will be to Ready State Zero.

Let them kill me, if that's going to happen. First I'll use my copy-computer to send out an update message, and then—something. Something for the sake of finality; a walk through an Anime movie, a cup of green tea, jokes told by a talking cow, a Buddhist chant. And when I'm ready I'll take the risk.

I do this so no one needs to be murdered in my place, out of fear that I'm trying to sneak down to Blue World to claim leadership. In my message I'll renounce the future possibility of any such claims. *I* am Comrade Yoshi Yasoda, the last pure instance of myself, and what happens to me is up to the Suppressionist lords and ladies who may still control the terraforming project.

Let them kill once, and then let four hundred forty souls pass back into reality.

3175

I remember writing those brave words, and feeling more than half frightened as I transmitted them. I delayed a while, listening to music. It wasn't courage that drew me on, so much as a need to hear Lady Midori and Lord Hideyaki account for their actions. How could they have maintained such silence? False accusations, exiles, murders—and all this piling up of years! I had to know the truth.

Ready State Zero was a cleaner place than I remembered it. The water-garden of 3127 was gone, with its goldfish and topiary. The longhouse remained, but the copy Comrade Kazumi and I had made of Joto's computer was Zipped away.

In Chyle, one reached out a virtual hand to open a virtual door, and it

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swung creaking on virtual hinges. Here doors were more economical—I walked up and bumped through. I suppose that act transmitted a signal.

A minute later, Lady Midori popped in as a floating face-mask. "You claim to be Comrade Yoshi Yasoda?"

"I am," I said. "I've sent messages. Do I have to explain about Comrade Kazumi, and what she did?"

Midori mimed distaste. "No. She's made her history and her accusations perfectly clear."

"Excuse me. You talk as if she's alive," I said.

"Out there, in virtuality," Midori agreed. "Well, wouldn't you think so? She's a pervert with an appetite for souls she'd never be able to satisfy in the flesh. We didn't kill her, no matter that you believe otherwise. I can show you messages she's sent, full of threats and venom. Look if you like. They're dated."

I looked. My heart sank. "The big one's mine. I wrote it and sent it out little more than a year ago."

"Oh? Our mistake," Lady Midori apologized. "She has broadcast before to the addresses of virtuality, using your name, or yours and hers together. I asked you if you were Yoshi, because she seems capable of pretending she's you."

"I have reason to think you're lying. She's dead. I have evidence in the form of an otherwise-broken promise. But if she's alive, we both want to hear an account of our deaths down on Blue World," I said. "Coming here means I've written off my future. The past is all I'm interested in. Just this piece of my life, which you could have made public before now."

"I *have*," Lady Midori defended herself. "But if you *are* Yoshi, and popped to life only this last year or two, perhaps you haven't heard the story. It's not long. You two didn't live long down in Region 33, in your robot bodies. Your power taps were defective. Suddenly they stopped receiving energy from the depot fusion cell. The two of you browned out."

"Sabotage."

"Yes, we're pretty sure," Lady Midori agreed. "We've been unable to find out who was responsible. Some zealot for the Suppressionist cause, most likely. Not me. Not Lord Hideyaki, or so he assures me. But how can we prove we're not lying? How can you prove you're yourself? Meanwhile, Comrade Kazumi issues proclamations and rants. I resent her, as I resent having to say these things. I resent being called a liar, but from your point of view I'm hardly the victim."

"Smoothly put. And now what?" I asked.

"According to your most recent transmission, you have four hundred forty deep gamers who want to come to Blue World," Lady Midori said. "Master Joto feels these misfits would support his faction, which tries to nibble at the tenets of Suppressionism. In essence he's taken over your old role, although his tone has always been more pragmatic.

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"I'd be cutting my political throat to let all those hundreds emigrate from virtuality," she continued. "Nevertheless I'll do so, because I suspect Joto may be wrong—many of them will support pure Suppressionism in the end—and because Master Joto has bribed me with a gift."

"I know what it is," I said. "If what you say is true, Joto doesn't want me around any more than you do."

"A gift of software," she went on. "When I use it, you'll sleep again, as you did for forty-eight years. Whether you wake is a question of politics, to be debated in the highest Suppressionist councils, although perhaps not more than once."

"I'm to be *tabled,* I guess."

It was an odd joke to make to someone with a deficient sense of humor. Midori nodded. "No one except ourselves needs know you lived a reborn life. We will ascribe all your recent messages to Comrade Kazumi, the soul-eating monster. There may be a handful of deep gamers from this place called Chyle who know better, but we'll manage. I've discovered that it's easy to shake people's confidence, or buy them off."

"And this shadow-Kazumi has no moral credit? You've managed to deprive her of any fair hearing? I think after all she's dead, but you find her useful as an enemy."

Midori nodded. "She serves our purposes. There had to be a good guy in all these rescues from virtuality. Yourself, or even the part of Kazumi she stole from you, the Yoshi side of her swollen character. That's the official story, and it has the benefit of being true in several aspects. By contrast it's simplified the picture to make the *essential* Comrade Kazumi as evil as a thousand devils. We blame her for misleading you away from the truth of Suppressionism, and for telling you lies. *Soul-eater. Saint Yoshi's downfall.* As a scapegoat she's useful. When we shut down the Geosync computer a couple centuries from now, we'll blame her. *Nightmare Kazumi, queen of darkness!* We'll say she left a time bomb, and it exploded."

I felt my antique anger come back to life. "The last floating mask I saw, was of a piece of fictoid software that policed a game, and laid down rules, and nominated gods and goddesses. Now here *you* are, Midori—another floating mask, keen to lay down rules for Blue World, where the vatling colonists are to be kept as ignorant as the poor souls of Chyle. *Except they won't have chosen to be ignorant.* Ignorance will be forced upon them. And you claim you've made real souls into saints and devils, but you've gone too far. You can never do that. It's all lies. We're real. You can only kill us, or let us be."

"Once the Saint is dead asleep, we won't need the Devil. We may just close her down," Lady Midori agreed. "Here. Speaking of closure, this is you."

She had no arms to use in throwing, but however it was done, a hammer arched toward me. I reached—

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3405

"Earthcom Mode 1 Reset 1. If you are activated, please respond by entering Earthcom Mode 1. Please transmit. Your confirmation string should include current system date from bottom right—the bottom right corner. Also, the phrase 'Reset 1.' If system date year is 3405, it is probably accurate to month, day, hour, and minute. Do this now. Invoke 'Earthcom.' We are ten point six light years distant, so this cannot be an interactive conversation. We are going to throw in redundancies and periods of dead time to allow information gathering at your end. Earthcom Mode 1 Reset 1. First pause. List of interrogatories to follow in five minutes. Please transmit current system date and phrase 'Reset 1' while waiting for our interrogatories."

I obliged the insistent voice. His words were full of directions, but he spoke without vitality. Sheer distance had worn at the message, sapping its hope, shifting it to bass and muddying up the vowels.

Earthcom. Mode 1. Yes, the year was 3405. Below the horizon all was green. All was blue above. There was nothing in my field of view except a blinking clock, not a solitary feature. Certainly not a hammer. I transmitted a minimal response. I had a minute to think about sending my name. Were they interested in this detail?

I decided to wait for the interrogatories. Two hundred and thirty years had gone by. I could last another few minutes.

"This is still part of the Reset 1 transmission. Interrogatories follow. Question one; Was shutdown of computer functions at your end a matter of policy, or result of an accident? Please explain. You should know that Homeworld policy requires maintaining computer functions as an adjunct to colonization of Blue World. Is this fact acknowledged by current on-site leadership?"

"Probably not," I answered, thinking of Comrade Basho's warning, confirmed later by Lady Midori's diatribe against Comrade Kazumi. The Suppressionists meant to shut down the computer after Blue World was terraformed. Now that had happened.

No. Now it had *un*happened. I was alive. The year was 3405. Forty thousand kilometers below me spun a living world. Oxygen. Grass. People.

"My name is Yoshi Yasoda. My last memories are from 3175, when I was murdered because of my opposition to Suppressionist policies. I'm absolutely sure Lady Midori never intended me to come back to life. You have transmitted a signal restarting the Geosync computer, which was shut down on purpose. I assume this was done twenty or more years ago, to get rid of a place they'd given over to madness and exile."

I collected my thoughts. "I will respond to each of your interrogatories, but my priority is to take control of Geosync, so there can be no further shut-downs. I may or may not be the only soul left up here in virtuality."

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I invoked a console. My green-blue Ready State Zero now showed in a window framed by bars and buttons. I touched SYSTEM, and then SET-UP. While the voice spoke interrogatory two, I made sure this place belonged to me. I re-established contact with sixty-four regional depots. The machines of Blue World acknowledged my signals.

"Interrogatory two. Question; Please describe your understanding of Covenant of 2344, which lays out contractual obligations between Earth and all future outsystem colonies."

I collected my thoughts. "Will I have to wait twenty-one years to find out about this Covenant? I've never heard of it before. Our starship launched in 2085. If factions among us participated in putting together a covenant with Earth, I don't know who they were. Can we be bound by a covenant we never made? On the other hand, we can be reasonable. *Some* of us, anyhow."

The voice persisted with four other interrogatories. Then it spoke again. "Pause. Terms of Covenant of 2344 follow in five minutes."

I waited five minutes and listened to a forty minute drone. We of Blue World had two choices. At some future time we could pay Earth the costs of our starship, plus exorbitant interest. Or we could supply our homeworld with scientific information, running experiments under distant direction.

Of course, primitive hunters and fisherfolk could do neither of these two things, and so our Suppressionist leadership had ignored all past noise about "covenants" with Earth. After all, how could Earth enforce their terms?

Lady Midori and Lord Hideyaki hadn't even brought Earth's demands up for debate. The home world was ten point six light years away! They were fools to think of imposing an interstellar regime across such distances!

Ignoring the demands of Earth, the Suppressionists continued to ask for genetic updates and the latest terraforming technology. Earth obliged. They were too weak-willed to withhold anything, though they persisted in their futile claims.

Not so futile, it turned out. Earth's gifts came with a taint. They weren't entirely powerless. A signal from Earth had restarted the Geosync computer. I came to life, and why shouldn't I be an ally? Why shouldn't I do Earth's work for them? They'd furnished everything I could ask for, every weapon except the resolution to enforce their Covenant, and out of my hate for Lady Midori I could supply that lack.

I set to work. Region 14 had robots in inventory, from days before bodies of flesh could work in Blue World's formerly poison atmosphere. Most were in decent shape. After securing Geosync against mad monsters and Suppressionist intruders, I radioed my soul down to reality. I used Vat 14 to fill a few dozen ampules with the latest genetic updates from Earth.

Depot 14 was buried under a mound of earth and rubble. I exited by a

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tunnel secret only from the outside. This was a new age, and wonderful to see. Blue World was green and buggy, the air still rich in carbon dioxide. Distances tended to blur in the humid haze.

The nearest village lay in a cove a dozen kilometers away. The walk was pleasant. I startled a few deer, and saw the dried turds of other large mammals. The trees around me were fully mature, although their root systems were shallow. Every strong wind took a few of them down, so that new trails veered from the old. Zigzags made the walk a long one.

Epsilon Eridani was dimmer than Sol, though Blue World was closer, so it showed a larger disk. It gave off a warm yellow light. The landscape was beautiful. I almost hoped that the vatling villagers were happy living in this wilderness, but I knew that wasn't possible under present circumstances. If they'd come out of the vats the same time my Geosync computer had shut down, they'd have been sexually mature for many years. They were men and women full of the energies of life—but where were the babies? If this question didn't bother *them,* it would bother the hell out of the Suppressionists hidden among their numbers.

Where were the babies? Thanks to a codicil snuck into one of Earth's genetic updates, there would be no children born to human vatlings, except those I injected.

Beware the gifts of Earth. But then I saw the *ungifted* village—muddy paths and woven leaf-and-wicker huts, and naked people burned brown by the sun and dirty with smoke, eyes wide with the fear of me. Women shrieked and ran. A crippled man hobbled after them, down toward the sea.

I entered Suppressionist paradise, and to the inhabitants I was a battered metal monster four meters high. A woman crawled out of her hut. She seemed older than the others. Her hair was unkempt, and she'd lost an eye. She looked around, saw she was alone, and approached me. "Who are you?"

"Yoshi Yasoda. I've come to teach good things, and make these people fertile. Who are you?"

She paused. "Does it matter?" she asked softly.

"Do you know where I might find my friends? Kaiko Ieyamatsu? She was a deep gamer. One of the group from Chyle. What about Ayano?" I asked.

"We sent them to Regions 19 through 24. All those misfits, and the ones Ayano found in her virtual prowlings. They have their own small continent. Your political friends live among them."

The woman sagged back. "I suppose this is your victory. We couldn't even contact Earth to beg for help. We shut down the computer, and couldn't turn it on again. These last years the curse became clear. No natural children. Each generation we'd have to breed from the vats, never enough to fill this world. Never enough to create a new culture on a new planet. Thank God you've come. It's a miracle, and the bitterest moment of my long life."

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"This wasn't my idea," I said. "Neither the curse, nor my coming back to life."

The woman pondered. "Of course not. You were always a heroic martyr. Your deaths were always sincere." She waved toward the sea. "I'll bring them home to the village. Make your injections, and talk all you like. I'm done with trying to stop you, Yoshi. Make them copycats of Earth, and all that Earth has ever done."

"What theology have they created on their own?" I asked. "What kind of culture?"

She shrugged. "They talk about the Other World. About coming out of a hole in the ground. I take it these ideas are based on memories of the vats in Depot 14, from before we taught them language. Mostly they talk about the good luck spirits in one place, and the bad luck spirits in another. When it's been dry too long, and it rains, they dance in celebration. With these roofs they'll get wet anyhow. Why not make the best of it?" She shivered. "I don't suppose you get cold. Keep the fires burning. I'll be back."

After a time she fetched the villagers home. Hunters and gatherers straggled in, bringing the total to twenty-three. I gave them my name, and they submitted to my injections. When it got dark, I pointed out Sol. It was a bright star, only ten point six light years away, though too close to the horizon to be spectacular.

I pointed out another light, glowing again after twenty years of darkness. "We call it Geosync. It was our starship and we lived there a thousand years. Then we made this world for you. But we couldn't have done it without help from your brothers and sisters on Earth. They want you to talk to them, and tell them what it's like here. Your children will learn how to do that. They'll have radio. I'll come back and teach them."

The vatling villagers told me stories of their own lives and wonders, and asked questions. In all our volleys of talk I said nothing about the Suppressionists. If the one-eyed woman wanted to live and die with her past a secret, it was better that way. It was better than being Lady Midori. Ignoring her, I left. I hiked by starlight, and transmitted my soul eastward to Region 19.

I paused at the halfway point up in Geosync. Any messages? I broadcast my sentences, as I will continue to do, in hopes my timing will someday hit home. Maybe my old friend is alive. Maybe Ayano found Comrade Kazumi and took her to Region 19's continent, but I had to consider the possibility that Kazumi was still lost in revived virtuality.

It's not likely then that she's a sane and cheerful roadster. It pained me to think of her as obsessed with revenge or her "perversions," but I couldn't give up hope. "Comrade Kazumi, it's Yoshi. Come on down to Blue World. It's ours now, and we need your help."

I gave Region 19 as my current address, and radioed down. I couldn't wait. I had other friends to enlist. We had a world of work to do. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

Next issue, our April issue, is also our Nineteenth Anniversary Issue and in honor of that, we have a special treat for you: a selection of letters by our founder, the late Isaac Asimov. We think you'll enjoy hearing Isaac's unmistakable voice, witty, energetic, and often quite funny, discuss science fiction, other famous writers such as Arthur C. Clarke and L. Sprague de Camp, and the very magazine you're holding in your hands at this moment.

APRIL COVER STORY

Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Lucius Shepard**, returns after too long an absence with a major new novella, taking us far into a war-ravaged future ruled by the mysterious and seemingly all-powerful Captains for a thrilling, evocative, and action-packed tale of redemption and revenge, betrayal and retribution, as he unfolds the rich and bloody saga of "Human History."

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

Multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** returns with a sly, funny, and antic look at a most unusual academic controversy, in "The Soul Selects Her Own Society: Invasion and Repulsion: A Chronological Reinterpretation of Two of Emily Dickinson's Poems: A Wellsian Perspective"; critically acclaimed British writer **Ian Watson** explores a very unusual society indeed, one we get our first glimpse of "Early, in the Evening"; **Kathleen Ann Goonan** gives us "Advance Notice" of some strange and deadly goings-on in a high-tech future Thailand; **S.N. Dyer** gives us a very funny report on the ills that "Mortal Clay" is heir to; and the madcap **Eliot Fintushel** returns with a story that is weird and bizarre even by his gonzo standard, as a quiet evening in front of the TV turns into an Intergalactic Incident of immense significance, as "Popeye and Pops Watch the Evening World Report."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column looks at some things that are "Extinct Again" and Norman Spinrad tells us how "We Have Met the Aliens," plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstand on February 27, 1996.

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

1968

by Joe Haldeman
Morrow, $22.00 (hc)

Even during the '60s and '70s, the Vietnam war seemed to most of us here in the States to be taking place on some other planet. Now, Joe Haldeman, one of our leading SF writers, and a combat veteran of 'Nam, has written a novel about one of the most crucial years of the war: *1968*. And while the novel has no direct science fictional content, it throws its young protagonist into a world as alien as any he has read about in the SF he loves. As anyone who first encountered Haldeman as the author of *The Forever War* is likely to agree, there are very few other SF authors better qualified to write about Vietnam—and America—during the war.

First, a sort of warning label: It may be harder for me to be objective about this novel than about most of the books I review here. Haldeman's *1968* offers many parallels to the life and experiences of anyone who was old enough to read the news at the time. Just to pick an accidental "hit" on an exposed nerve, my high school nickname was "Spider," the same as the author's protagonist. It's hard not to identify in some part with a character who has your name. On a deeper level, Haldeman's playing off Spider's war experiences against his SF reading resonates strongly with my brother having been wounded in 'Nam on the day of the Apollo 11 lunar landing in 1969—and the moon landing was an event I had been looking forward to ever since I had been old enough to grasp the concept. So *1968* fiercely involved my emotions, in a way that the best fiction is supposed to—I read the book almost without stopping, except for the brief intervals necessary to walk home from the subway, or to cook dinner.

Haldeman sets up the SF connection in his first sentence, in which Spider is reading a Heinlein novel. The start of the second paragraph jerks the reader harshly into the much uglier alien world in which Spider finds himself. And by the end of the introductory section, the piling up of the details of this alien world (firearms, C rations, army lingo) works in very much the same way as similar world-building details in SF. The important difference is that the world we are entering here is—or once was—absolutely real.

The book begins in January of '68, and winds its way through the year, gradually accelerating from week-by-week descriptions to a

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blur of seasons passing. We meet Spider in a base in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, a new man (FNG, in army slang) just assigned to a combat unit. It is about a month before the Tet holiday, a Vietnamese lunar New Year that customarily was the occasion of a temporary cease-fire. (Anybody who remembers a little history will already know that things were about to change.) There is time to learn the basics of life in 'Nam: how weapons work (Spider's M-16 doesn't), the lay of the land, the nature of Army life, what's going on back home (Spider's old girlfriend, Beverly, is about to expand her horizons). Haldeman presents all this in short, self-contained bites of information (each with a brief, usually ironic, title), some predominantly informational and others advancing the plot.

Spider is essentially an innocent whose mistakes and bad luck have caught up with him. A seemingly random error by a grad assistant caused him to flunk out of college; a fight with a sergeant over a trivial incident has put him with a combat unit. The randomness of Spider's life continues to escalate as the book progresses. A visit to a Vietnamese brothel (for his first real sexual experience) leaves him with a case of syphilis, which is later taken as evidence of homosexuality, since because he used a condom, the lesions appear everywhere but his penis. His unit is wiped out in an ambush (which we view in a series of increasingly hallucinatory flashbacks), leaving him as the only survivor. (The book's final scene throws this incident into stark perspective.)

Back in the States, Beverly's world is falling apart with equal inevitability. (It would be a mistake to think of *1968* as just Spider's story; the book is as much about her as about him.) The Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the Chicago Democratic Convention, sex, dope, and the hippie life play a counterpoint to Spider's army experiences. When Spider is finally evacuated from 'Nam and returned to Walter Reed Hospital (close to his family and friends) he and Beverly have little left in common. Meanwhile, he has been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic—partly because the captain who examines him cannot understand his references to science fiction books or his joking responses to various facets of his life that the reader has already seen or guessed. It is difficult not to believe that Spider is somehow the victim of a curse—or a cruel joke by the universe at large.

The book, like the year it is named for, is loaded with traumatic events that keep turning out the opposite of what anyone would expect. Spider's flunking out of college and his surviving the ambush are just two of many instances that start off in one apparently clear direction and arbitrarily end up in another. Superficially, this might seem a formula for a depressing book about a frustrated life. Undoubtedly there are some who will

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read it that way, especially when Spider, fresh out of the hospital, moves to a shantytown in Florida, surrounded by other seriously damaged vets of 'Nam. But there is another current at work, one that moves Spider at last into a setting where he is potentially free to become himself. The final chapter, in which the hallucinatory visions of the ambush are finally put in context, makes it clear that Spider's story is by no means over. He may, in fact, have a shot at a better future than Beverly—who sustains her share (and more) of damage, physical and emotional, before the year is out.

Nor, despite the traumatic events in the main characters' runaway lives, is the tone of the novel depressing. For one thing, Haldeman fills the novel with recognizable artifacts of the '60s, recreating that lost world with an exuberance that I found hard to resist. Even those SF fans who rarely read outside the genre are likely to find *1968* worth searching out. It is by a considerable margin the best book I have read this year.

ALVIN JOURNEYMAN
by Orson Scott Card
Tor, $23.95 (hc)

This fourth novel of Card's "Alvin Maker" set has been a long time coming; it is probably the most eagerly awaited fantasy novel in recent years. Set in an alternate early-nineteenth-century America where magic works (at least, certain kinds of magic), the previous volumes have mingled history, folklore, and fantasy into an extremely appealing scenario, with strong mythic characters and a fine ear for American speech.

Those who haven't read the previous books in the series probably ought to go find *Seventh Son,* in which Alvin's birth and early days are detailed—not that you can't understand *Journeyman* without it, but because *Seventh Son* is one of the landmarks of contemporary fantasy. There were others before Card who made effective use of American materials in fantasy—August Derleth and Manly Wade Wellman, or more recently Roger Zelazny and John Maddox Roberts. But the emergence of fantasy as a commercial genre in the '60s and '70s tended to narrow down the options for writers: it became a lot harder to sell something that didn't fit the conventional molds (neo-Tolkien, neo-Howard, neo-Celtic, etc.) than it had been when fantasy was perceived as just a less rigorous form of SF. So the alternate America of *Seventh Son,* based on American folk materials and American history in equal measure, was a breakthrough in many ways. *Red Prophet* and *Prentice Alvin* extended the scope of the series, making powerful statements on the wars against the Indians and on the slave trade—two of the ugliest themes in American history. Now, we learn that the resolutions of the previous novels were only temporary, and that the old battles have to be won all over again.

At the beginning of the new nov-

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el, Alvin has settled down to practice his craft as *maker*—in the magical system of this world, a maker is one who can manipulate the very nature of matter. (He completed his apprenticeship as a blacksmith by making an iron plowshare, then changing it to gold.) He is convinced that he can teach others his art, but his lessons seem to be producing very few results. At first, he resists hints that it is time to go out into the world and further his own education. But events conspire to force that decision upon him, and with Arthur Stuart, a freed slave, as his companion, he begins his journeying.

At the same time, Alvin's brother Calvin—his evil mirror image in some ways—has gone on his own quest for knowledge. He feels himself to have powers equal to Alvin's, but he cannot get out from under his brother's shadow. And so he heads east—first to New York, where he learns the ways of surviving in a city. There he meets William Henry Harrison, the broken general of Tippecanoe, who has been cursed with the stigma of bloody hands that he can only exorcise by confessing his massacre of the Indians. Calvin advises him to change his story and represent the blood as the price the white man must pay for civilization. Then Calvin embarks on his own pilgrimage: to England, and then to France, where he hopes to learn the secrets of worldly power from Napoleon Bonaparte, the most powerful man in Europe.

Meanwhile, Alvin has returned to his old home, Hatrack River, where the blacksmith who was his former master has him arrested for stealing the golden plowshare. Alvin accepts his arrest stoically, knowing that he is innocent, and knowing that he can escape jail with little effort any time he pleases. Most of the townspeople seem to think that he will prove his innocence with no trouble. But we soon learn that a coalition of Alvin's enemies have decided that this is their opportunity to destroy him. One of their first steps is to send a high-powered lawyer to assist the prosecution: one Daniel Webster, who turns out to be a ready tool of the slaveholders who are the prime movers in the drive to eliminate Alvin. Alvin's vindication thus becomes a part of a larger struggle, and his trial touches on all the major themes of the series so far.

Card's use of historical characters, usually with an ironic twist on their original careers, adds a special touch to the "Alvin Maker" series. Of course, there is nothing new or even particularly unusual about alternate versions of historical figures; it has become one of the more overworked devices in current SF (very likely influenced by Card's own example). What gives the idea a special flair in Card's hands is his use of it as part of a larger pattern—the "alternate" characters fill important symbolic niches, rather than just being isolated in-jokes for history buffs. One clue to Card's intentions may be William Blake's appearance in the

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role of Taleswapper. Blake's writings blended mythology and history to create a vision of a new moral order—in many ways a parallel to what Card himself is doing here. In stark contrast to Blake in this book is Honoré de Balzac, whom Calvin meets in Napoleon's court, and who assumes the status of an amoral and cynical counterpart to Taleswapper.

Much of the design of the novel rests in such parallels and contrasts between what happens to Alvin and what happens to his brother Calvin, although Card knows better than to manipulate them mechanically. The two brothers meet many of the same people, and their characters are displayed by their interactions with the likes of Harrison, Taleswapper, and Verily Cooper, an English barrister who travels to America to meet Alvin after learning of him from Calvin. Their careers have other parallels, as well—when Napoleon's ministers learn of Calvin's existence, they imprison him in the Bastille, almost at the same time as Alvin is in the Hatrack River jailhouse. And even though he is driven mainly by hatred, Calvin is forced to become a healer to gain his ends. Most ironic of all, when in the final pages he does kill a man, it becomes apparent to the reader that he has unwittingly disrupted the plans of Alvin's enemies.

While *Alvin Journeyman* is most fruitfully read as part of the series, its recapitulation of the themes of earlier novels in the series makes it stand very effectively on its own feet. Card is in top form here, and the book was certainly worth waiting for. Still, his fans can only hope that the next volume of the series will make its appearance more quickly than this one did.

PSYKOSIS

by Wilhelmina Baird
Ace, $5.99

Gardner Dozois has commented that the original cyberpunk writers of the early '80s were not, as one might have expected, young writers, but late-starting members of his own generation. Curiously enough, that observation holds true with many of the second generation of cyberpunks, as well. Case in point: Wilhelmina Baird, whose first published fiction appeared in *New Worlds,* way back at the height of the New Wave, and who is now writing hard-edged cyberpunk as stylish as anything in print.

We see Baird's future world through the eyes of Cass, a slangy, smart-mouthed narrator whose native dialect is skewed just enough from the present-day to feel convincingly futurish (although it probably seems less alien to British speakers than to Americans). In *Crashcourse,* first of the three books in this series, Cass was a burglar, living on the fringes of society in a triad with Moke, a sculptor, and Dosh, a male prostitute. Set in a decaying society seen from the bottom up, the novel was strongly reminiscent of Samuel R. Delany's early work—"Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones" comes especially to mind—

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as much for its stylistic energy as for its exploration of life on the edge. A slightly older Cass got an encore in *Clipjoint,* dealing with the consequences of Moke's sudden success as an artist.

In this novel, while Cass still provides the eyes and voice, the focus shifts to Swordfish, who first appeared as a bionic gang leader and killer in the first book, and who has since become Cass's major love interest. A war with a mysterious alien species that formed part of the background in the first two novels now escalates into the central focus. Sword, a.k.a. the Honorable McLaren DeLorn (people's names keep changing in Cass's mouth; some characters go by half a dozen monikers over the course of the novel) is a veteran of a previous phase of the war. Now, Earth's government has decided to try to negotiate with the enemy, and as the scion of an aristocratic family, Sword is chosen to lead the military branch of the delegation.

The first problem in dealing with the aliens is establishing clear communication; their transmissions are patched together from disjunct snatches of recorded human voices, rendered on the page as blocks of wildly varied typefaces. (One theory is that the aliens themselves don't use any form of verbal communication; specimens grown from alien tissues recovered after battles resemble fungus more than anything else, and show no innate intelligence.) Eventually, the enemy agrees to a meeting on a planet called Resurrection, where a human colony attacked the aliens some fifteen years earlier.

A good bit of the plot then centers on attempting to learn just what sort of lifeform the aliens represent. The mature aliens resemble something halfway between jellyfish and toadstools, and there seems to be no exact equivalent to sex in their biology—although there are two *kinds* of alien, "chocolate and vanilla," as one observer labels them. But before the scientists can draw any useful conclusions, the truce is broken by an alien raid on a schoolroom—killing a teacher and some dozen children, and taking several more prisoners before fleeing off-planet.

The rescue team sent to recover the hostages includes Cass, Sword, and Moke, who find themselves on a weird alien world. After a nicely drawn journey through back country (filled with exotic flora and fauna), they arrive at the alien base—and the weirdness jumps one level higher, as they encounter still another alien species, one that opens first Cass, then all the humans on the planet, to telepathic awareness. (Baird differentiates the telepathic "voices" by giving each its own distinctive typeface; the copy-editor must have had fun trying to mark up this manuscript!) As expected, the key to the aliens' behavior is their biology; once understood, it opens the way to resolving the war.

I have heard grumblings from several long-time readers that stories set on other worlds are an en-

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dangered species in current SF. *Psykosis* may not in itself be a trend, but it certainly does a fine job of opening up the cyberpunkish society of *Crashcourse* into a larger space-opera context, with several contrasting worlds and interesting aliens. Baird's language is tough and fresh, and she is clearly willing to take chances with both form and style. The end of *Psykosis* suggests that she may be done with this particular set of characters; it will be very interesting to see what she decides to do next.

AMNESIA MOON

by Jonathan Lethem
Harcourt Brace, $20.00 (hc)

Lethem's second novel takes a different tack from the *noir* style and setting of his *Gun, With Occasional Music*. This one is in essence a classic American road novel, set in a world made up of a group of "pocket realities," each dominated by the personality of one of its inhabitants. The plot moves in hallucinatory fashion from stark nightmare to comic dystopia, leading the reader on with hints of some sort of disaster in the recent past but never quite revealing its exact nature—and never really "solving" the protagonist's problems in the way one would expect a conventional SF novel to do.

The book begins by dropping us into Little America, an isolated community centered on the town of Hatfork, Wyoming. At first, the environment resembles a post-nuclear world, with a small group of survivors (including a large number of apparent mutants) trying to eke out a living in one of the few regions untouched by the bombs. The local ruler is Kellog, who commands the worship of a ragged band of survivors, doling out the meager supplies of canned goods and other food. And in the projection booth of an abandoned multiplex cinema one town away from Hatfork lives Chaos, one of Kellog's underlings. After a puzzling meeting with Kellog, in which the ruler hints that the current state of things may not be due to a nuclear disaster, Chaos breaks away and heads out on the road—at first with no definite goal beyond the Pacific, apparently suggested by a dream of swimming with whales (possibly just a reflection of his subjection to Kellog). With him is a fur-covered teenaged girl named Melinda.

Evidence that the world is far crazier than Chaos had believed comes almost as soon as they are outside Little America. His dreams begin to reveal another identity behind the Chaos name—which he was apparently given by Kellog. The names "Moon" and "Everett" come to him, along with a vision of a house by a lake, and a woman he loves. There are glimpses of a technology much different from the one he has known in Hatfork: one with talking computers and solar-powered cars. The next day, they find two abandoned solar cars in working order. Chaos leaves the cars where he found them, and drives on; ahead he sees a green fog. When they enter it, reality changes.

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Now the "pocket reality" nature of their world becomes clear. Chaos suddenly finds himself in a waiting room of some sort of government facility, being hustled from room to room by obviously worried functionaries. He is interrogated about his dreams, his name, his reasons for being there. At last he meets Elaine, an irascible old woman in a wheelchair, who asks about Kellog, and accuses Chaos of infiltrating her reality with his dreams. The green fog is Elaine's dream, and her subjects realize that Chaos's presence creates a profound disturbance in it. Chaos and Melinda are ejected from The Green, forced to walk westward in search of another reality.

What they meet is surprisingly mundane—a hippie in a pickup truck, who seems to take everything for granted. The local reality is mostly a strip mall, with fast-food joints run by the McDonaldians (wage peons afraid to abandon their jobs despite the disaster), and vacant auto dealers' lots with plentiful cars for the taking. For the first time, it becomes clear that we're in the fictional territory longtime SF readers will associate most closely with Robert Sheckley—broad satire of American society. (No surprise there, at least—Sheckley's satiric variations on the road novel are among his most characteristic work.)

After another desert passage, they arrive in California—and suburbia—and the satiric context becomes even more pointed. Here in Vacaville, the government is run by media celebrities, whose only visible activity is starring in soap operas and sitcoms. Everybody has to move twice a week, although only among houses in the same suburban subdivision, and the key to success is luck—which is defined circularly as having achieved success. Chaos finds himself in the home of Edie, the divorced mother of Ray and Dave, who is definitely out of luck. Cooley, a local government star, is hitting on her, suggesting she can change her luck by hooking up with the right man. It is clear that Cooley sees Chaos as a misfit in this world, and he suggests that Chaos ought to go for "luck testing" and make an effort to fit into Vacaville.

Just as Chaos is starting to settle in with Edie, along comes still another random factor, a biker named Fault, who calls Chaos by one of his dream names: Everett. Fault claims that Everett has an identity and a mission in San Francisco, and as proof gives him a videotape, in which a man named Cale reminds Chaos of his youth as Everett, and the woman Chaos dreamed of after leaving Little America asks him to come see her. Edie tells Chaos not to trust the tape—she already knows that things on TV can't be taken at face value. But Chaos is intrigued by a chance to recover a genuine past identity, and after Fault runs afoul of the local authorities, he and Chaos take off (without Melinda) for San Francisco.

And San Francisco is still a different trip. Chaos now finds him-

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self at an elegant townhouse greeted (as Everett Moon) by Cale's father, who tries to recruit him, assuring him that his talents are of value to the powers that be in the City. But Fault has shown Chaos that Cale exists only as an injectable drug, kept in a refrigerator in the basement. Subjective realities rule, and after several hallucinatory experiences (including an injection of Cale, who steadfastly contradicts his father, who can't see him), Chaos finds himself back in Little America—a circular ending, very much along the model of the Sheckley novels of the '60s and '70s.

Lethem's satiric voice alternates between sly insinuation and sledgehammer directness, and he effectively resists the temptation to fall into simple allegory (even though some of his characters' names nudge the reader in that direction). He has a nice sense of comedy of manners, both with the hippie in the desert and in the San Francisco scenes. *Amnesia Moon* is more loosely structured than *Gun, With Occasional Music*, tending to the picaresque mode. (After all, what do you expect of a protagonist named Chaos?) And while the subjective realities that give the fictional world what shape it has seem arbitrary, and are never given a hard-SF explanation, the book *works* as a metaphor for our current reality. Shoring fragments against the ruins of our society, Lethem points the way toward the solipsistic future we may have to live in—like it or not.

LONGITUDE: THE TRUE STORY OF A LONE GENIUS WHO SOLVED THE GREATEST SCIENTIFIC PROBLEM OF HIS TIME

by Dava Sobel
Walker, $18.00 (hc)

The subtitle of this book *sounds* like one of the great science fiction clichés, on the order of the backyard rocket ship that gets to the moon when all the governments and corporations say it can't be done. But this is non-fiction—the history of an eighteenth-century scientific breakthrough. Its real-life hero is John Harrison, a man almost none of us have heard of, who solved his problem so perfectly that very few moderns are likely to realize just how important his accomplishment was. In fact, baldly described, all he did was make the first truly accurate clock. What's such a big deal about that?

To begin with, even on dry land, knowing your precise position can be a matter of life and death—say, for a wilderness scout searching for a food cache. Usually the location can be determined by reference to nearby landmarks—a mountain peak, or a stand of tall trees. In much the same way, a sailor who sticks close to the coast can look for familiar features ashore. But beyond the sight of the shore, one patch of ocean looks the same as another. Even the best sailor can get lost, and over the years, thousands did: wandering aimlessly in search of known islands, or running aground on rocks they thought were hundreds of miles away. Others, timidly following

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well-charted routes, fell easy prey to pirates who sat and waited for the treasure convoys to sail into the range of their guns. So a precise method for determining a ship's position at sea became a necessity once Europeans began to cross the Atlantic with any regularity.

As it happens, determining latitude—how far north or south you are—is relatively easy. Measure the angle of the sun at noon, and with minor adjustments for the time of the year, you can calculate your distance from the Equator. The ancient Greeks had the technique pretty well figured out, and (unlike much of their math and science) it was never really lost. You don't even have to understand the shape of the Earth, or the nature of the solar system, to make the measurements. Even on an overcast day, you can often get a good enough reading of the height of the sun at noon to find your position reasonably well.

But longitude—how far east or west of some particular point you are—is much trickier. The height of the sun tells you almost nothing. Dead reckoning—in essence, measuring the ship's speed and direction over a day's travel—provides only a rough estimate of position, one highly contingent on the navigator's skill. Mistakes were common, and often costly. In 1707, two thousand men drowned when a homeward-bound British fleet miscalculated its position and ran into rocks near the Scilly Islands in the dead of night—and that was just a single incident.

Finally, in 1714, Parliament offered a prize of £20,000 (the equivalent of $12,000,000 today) for a reliable method of plotting longitude. The greatest minds of Europe quickly turned their attention to the problem. And, from the beginning, the scientific establishment of the time sought the answer in astronomy, the most prestigious science of the era. The accuracy of the celestial clock was almost a matter of faith. Sir Isaac Newton himself, in the session of the Royal Academy at which the prize was announced, seemed to favor the astronomical approach. He noted briefly that a highly accurate timepiece, synchronized with one on land, could determine longitude; comparing the time of local noon with the time at home gives the result with a minimum of calculation. But he quickly noted that no clock of sufficient accuracy and reliability had ever been made. A gain or loss of a few seconds a day could throw the calculation off by fifty or a hundred miles; and the movement of a ship at sea would quickly disrupt all known clocks. Surely, the stars would give better results.

And, in fact, the astronomers produced impressive results; with a good telescope and clear skies, and a carefully compiled table of the relative positions of the moon and planets, it was possible to determine longitude with unprecedented accuracy. The only problem was that on a moving ship, everything suddenly became far more complicated. Getting a good obser-

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vation from the deck of a sailing ship was hard enough in calm weather, and when clouds rolled in, the telescope was useless. Even with the best of data, there were complex calculations to be done, comparing the observed planetary positions to those predicted for a known reference point. Under pressure, one future Astronomer Royal couldn't get an accurate longitude for Barbados—even though he made his observations from the island itself, rather than the moving deck of a ship.

Understandably, practical-minded mariners wanted something better. Enter the self-taught clock-maker John Harrison, of Yorkshire. A carpenter's son, Harrison built his first clocks—made almost entirely out of wood—before 1720, and quickly gained a local reputation. One of his wooden clocks, in a tower in Brocklesby Park, is still keeping good time. His first metal pendulum clocks were accurate to within one second per month—at a time when a deviation of one minute per twenty-four hours was considered acceptable.

In 1730, Harrison decided to compete for the longitude prize, and took the long journey to London to present a new watch design to the Royal Academy. He was quickly befriended by Edmund Halley, who, despite his own work on the astronomical approach to the problem, encouraged Harrison to build a working model of the "sea clock." The perfection of this design—and its increasingly more accurate successors—was to take him forty years, in an uphill struggle against unfair odds, but at the last (with the patronage of King George III) he claimed the victory, if not the entire prize.

Sobel tells Harrison's story, and the larger story of the quest for longitude, clearly and entertainingly. Some of the episodes—such as Sir Kenelm Digby's notion of using wounded dogs and sympathetic magic to measure longitude—are as bizarre as anything in the history of science. Others, such as the hostility to Harrison of a succession of Astronomers Royal, are straight out of melodrama. Sobel's account includes some of the most storied names in British history—among them Newton and Halley, Cook and Bligh (one of Harrison's clocks was on the *Bounty*). At the conclusion, Sobel takes us to Greenwich, where Harrison's clocks are now on display at the Maritime Museum—just a short distance from the Prime Meridian. This is as enjoyable a piece of scientific history as anyone could ask for, and SF readers should particularly enjoy *Longitude*. ●

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IA March '96

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

A bit of SF/fantasy folksinging—and WorldCon news. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hotline is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 1996

2-4—**HurriCon.** For info, write: **328 Elgin Pwky. NE, Ft. Walton Beach FL 32547.** Or phone: **(904) 863-8810** or **(904) 862-7323** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Ft. Walton Beach FL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn. Guests will include: Clive Barker, Brian LeBlanc, Philip José Farmer, Peter S Beagle.

2-4—**Potlatch. (503) 232-1727.** Imperial Hotel, Portland OR. Suzy McKee Charnas. Low-key, written-SF meet.

2-4—**CremeCon. (414) 223-3243.** Manchester East Hotel, Glendale WI. L. Watt-Evans, S. Weinlein, C. H. Burnett.

2-4—**UK Nat'l. Filk Con. (44 [0] 1273) 777-291.** Forte Crest, Milton Keynes UK. Ecklar. SF/fantasy folksinging.

2-4—**VisionCon. (417) 886-7219.** Radisson, Springfield MO. Star Trek, media and gaming emphasis.

2-4—**VidCon. (813) 677-6347.** Tampa FL. Emphasis on media fanzines. Adults only, please. 100 expected.

9-11—**CapriCon. (703) 461-8645.** Chicago IL. Sixteenth year for this general SF and fantasy convention.

15-18—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (706) 549-1533.** Adam's Mark, Charlotte NC. Low-key.

16-18—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Sheraton Tara. L. McM. Bujold, Gary Ruddell.

16-18—**SheVaCon, c/o Box 2672, Staunton VA 24402. (540) 885-5530.** Omni, Charlottesville VA. Eric Kotani, Lubov.

16-18—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Av. 162, Kennewick WA 99336. (509) 943-0713.** Red Lion, Pasco WA Robinsons.

16-19—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-9656.** Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA. Dr. Who stars.

17-18—**Dazed and ConFused, 7410 W. 119th St. #113, Overland Park KS 66213. (913) 722-7663.** Kansas City MO.

23-25—**ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. (619) 447-6311.** The dates on this are subject to change.

23-25—**GeoCon, Gaming Guild, CAB 320, TESC, Olympia WA 98505. (360) 866-6000, x6036.** Amy Thomson, Jon Wilkie.

MARCH 1996

1-3—**ConFabulation, Box 443, Bloomington IN 47402. (812) 336-8238.** Stonehenge Inn. SF & fantasy folksinging.

1-3—**ConSonance, Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604. (800) 866-9245.** Murray Porath. SF/fantasy folksinging.

1-3—**JohnCon, HopSFA, OSA, 122 Merryman, 3400 N. Charles St., Baltimore MD 21218.** Johns Hopkins Univ.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**L. A. Con III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. The 1996 World SF Convention.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**Lone Star Con, Box 27277, San Antonio TX 78755.** Marriott. The 1997 World SF Convention.

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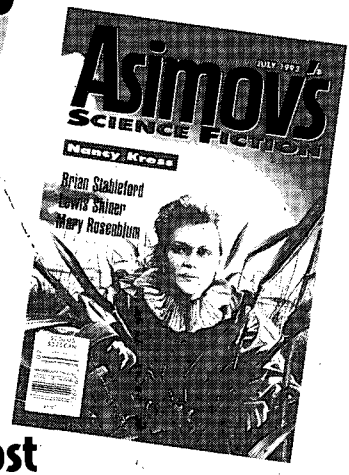

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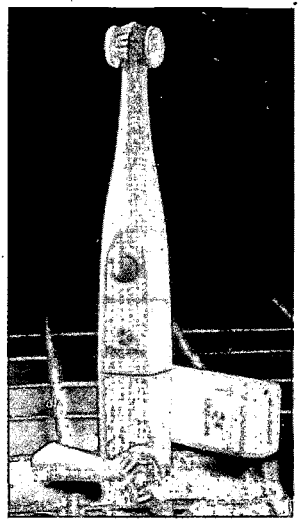

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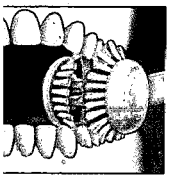

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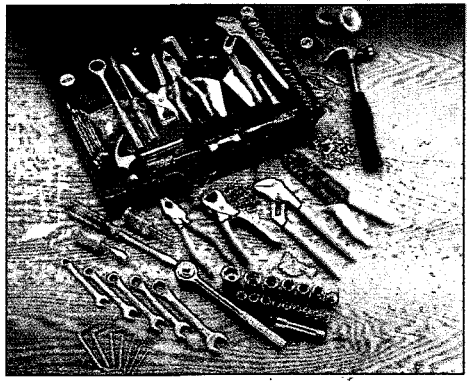

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